

NOVEL
20

Written by
Rifujiin na
Magonote

Illustrated by
Shirotaka

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation





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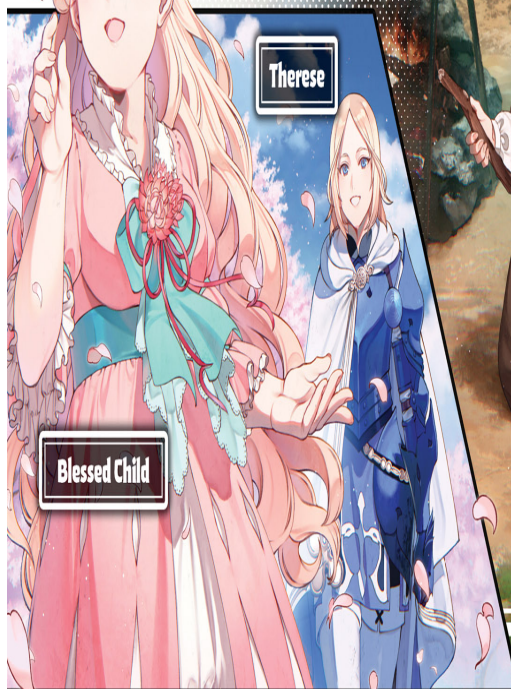
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ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**



“I hate to ask this sort of thing behind Cliff’s back...but I must say that I’m a bit worried.”

Elinalise’s breath fogged from more than just the cold.

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VOLUME 20: ADULTHOOD — CLIFF ARC

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*"Time is gentle. It always encourages
us to choose."*

—Time is cruel. It always forces us to choose.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

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Chapter 1: Plans for the Future and Cliff's Concerns

ONE MONTH HAD PASSED since the events in the Shirone Kingdom. Winter was drawing to a close, and spring was right around the corner. For the past month, I'd focused on crafting a detailed plan with Orsted. Our first order of business: gathering allies. For this, we settled on a three-pronged approach.

The first major goal would be putting together an intelligence agency to gather information. Ruquag's Mercenary Band, the group that Aisha and Linia set up, would work nicely for this. Its top brass were all my people, so I might as well use them. I'd have their full cooperation behind the scenes. I'd structure the group's global hierarchy such that headquarters maintained contact with each branch, so it would pull in information from countries around the world. I'd design them so that if I ever couldn't make it to headquarters, I could still visit a branch to learn every detail of the current news.

This would be less for Orsted's use and more for mine. I was placing my pieces on the board, ready to be played.

The second goal was to draw in figures of authority and future leaders. Laplace's resurrection was going to trigger a war—with all of humanity, I suppose. If each nation was prepared, it would only improve their response times when the invasion finally came. So, we'd inform those in power of the coming war and what was at stake. We'd offer whatever little aid we could and have them prepare for what was coming for us in eighty years at whatever pace they could manage. The cooperation of these nations in the coming Laplace war could make our lives as Ruquag's Mercenary Band easier if we had it—or much, much harder if we didn't.

The third prong in the plan was to recruit warriors for combat. This was the primary goal, as far as Orsted was concerned. He'd rather other fighters take on Laplace instead of him. If we managed to lift Orsted's curse so he didn't have to fight solo anymore, then we could even have our new recruits join the final battle against the Man-God. Orsted and I talked over who would be a good fit, and finally settled on this profile: *The warriors already fated to battle Laplace, but who won't*

easily become disciples of the Man-God.

For instance, titles such as Ogre God and Ore God— their current holders had no hate or love for Laplace, but future generations would oppose him later on. Same for schools like Water God Style and Sword God Style—the current practitioners were far removed from Laplace, but their apprentices would face him down as well. We also planned to ask long-living warriors like North God Kalman the Third or Death God Randolph. Some held personal grudges against Laplace—Ruijerd especially. Ruquag’s Mercenary Band could locate the ones whose whereabouts were unknown, after which I could visit them personally and negotiate on my hands and knees. I imagined that some of them would ask me to make it worth their while. But for now, the plan more or less came down to asking all the strong and capable people that came to mind.

Now, then.

Once we assembled all those resources, we’d be faced with final bottleneck: the Man-God. Knowing him, he was sure to send his disciples to get in our way. For the most part, we didn’t know who might end up serving as one of the Man-God’s disciples. Orsted said that he could estimate the odds in any normal loop, but since the disciples in this loop already included people who’d never joined the Man-God before, it would be hard to tell for certain. If I wanted to carry out my missions, then I had to risk-proof them against disciples that Orsted wouldn’t see coming.

As for how I could do that... To be honest, I couldn’t think of anything. So, I decided not to think. I didn’t know what standards the Man-God chose his disciples by. Orsted said he “tended to choose those with strong fate,” but people with weak fates had already shown up as disciples. I didn’t even get how you could measure the “strength” of someone’s fate. It seemed like the kind of rule that only Orsted and the Man-God would understand. Even if I tried to follow every minute detail, asking Orsted about every little thing would just give him more of a headache. Thinking about it wouldn’t get me very far.

I was a small piece in this game, but pawns can still make power moves. I could spread a message among the people we ally with, something like, “don’t believe what comes to you in a dream.” Disciples would probably pop up, even so. We’d just have to confirm it with anyone we find suspicious and kill them if necessary. A tough job, but

I'd do it.

Aside from that looming and nasty work, there weren't any downsides to making every ally I could. After all, the Man-God could only have three disciples at a time, which meant that every number added to our forces gave us an advantage. If there were only five people on our side, our strength would fall by twenty percent if one were to betray us and become a disciple. If that disciple joined the enemy forces, the math would look even worse for us. But if there were ten of us, or maybe twenty of us. Maybe a hundred, or a thousand... Basically, the greater our numbers, the less impact a betrayal or two would have on our position. True, we'd be screwed if a leader on our side fell under the Man-God's control and turned a thousand allies into enemies, so I had to minimize that risk by not giving any one leader too much power. Then again, I was going to be that leader for a while, so I didn't need to worry about it for now. It'd become a problem following my death, but there already were plenty of leaders far more suited to the job than I was, and more in line after that. I already had Roxy, after all.

Recruitment was just one of many logistical needs. I needed a way to contact Orsted, for instance. Our failure to prevent Pax's death during our last battle happened due to a lack of communication. Of course, it was far from the only cause...but if we'd had some clear way to reach Orsted, we might have been able to stop it. I couldn't rely on Orsted for everything, but our plans were going to have us working separately more and more, so communication would be crucial. It was better to handle a delicate situation after consulting with your team than to trust your gut feeling alone. And if you knew your ally was in danger, you could rush to help. Not that I could imagine Orsted needing me to save him, but even being able to send him some information one-way could help him in a pinch.

And so, I brought all this up to Orsted. I tried to explain the concept of a phone while asking if something like that already existed, and whether we could make one if it didn't.

"So, a magical implement that can send voices or text?" Orsted asked.

"Text alone would be fine, but I figure it'd help if we had some way to share information over long distances. Like, if I have to make a tough decision, I'd rather talk it over with someone first. Do you think that's possible?"

I wasn't optimistic. That would've been too convenient, right?

"The dragonfolk have a magical implement like that," said Orsted. "If we recreate it, then it should be possible to do what you're asking."

I was surprised. "Huh, so stuff like that really does exist?"

"Yes. You've seen one before, too."

For real? When the heck did that happen? Something like that would've been way too handy for me to forget about it.

"The monuments to the Seven Great Powers and the Adventurers' Guild cards."

"Oh, those!"

Now that he mentioned it, I had seen them. The Adventurers' Guild cards accepted voice input, and the monuments to the Seven Great Powers had the same text all over the world. Interesting, though; I didn't know that the Adventurers' Guild cards were dragonfolk-made. They did seem unusually sci-fi for a world like this...

"It'll take some modifications," Orsted continued, "but I'll try making them."

"Huh? You mean you'd make them yourself?"

"Your arrival already threw a wrench into all of my predictions. I may as well make those things in case we ever need them. Besides, they'll be useful next time, too."

And with that, Orsted offered to make them himself. Definitely a miscalculation I was happy to have made. Knowing that Orsted would still want me as an ally next time made me all the happier.

"There's a chance it won't work out, so keep that in mind," Orsted warned.

"Roger Wilco, boss!"

That settled the communicator issue.

One more thing, though. Given our failure last time, it was clear that there was something else I needed to make: a way to transport the Magic Armor. Even though I managed to bring the Version One with me last time, the only use it got was when I traveled in it. Hauling it from the city to the fort was already a huge hassle, but not being able to fit it inside the castle meant that it ended up useless during my fight with Death God Randolph. I didn't think I'd be fighting anyone on the Death

God's level any time soon, but I couldn't rule it out. Given how dire the situation was back then, I wanted to be proactive this time around.

Development on the Version Three was still progressing, of course, and its goal was to resolve these issues by being both powerful and lightweight. However, there was still a long way to go before it would be completed. Even with Zanoba's full cooperation it was still going to take a year or two to finish this project.

To that, one suggestion came to mind. Why not summon the Version One as is? According to what Sylvaril once taught me, physical objects couldn't be summoned...but I felt like, you know, with a little change of perspective, it might be possible. I planned to try it out myself just to be sure. If it didn't work, then that would be that.

With that, plans for gathering allies were finalized. For now, I would expand Ruquag's Mercenary Band and network with powerful figures in nations around the world. We'd start with Cliff and Ariel—a relative of the Millis Church's pope, and the next ruler of the Asura Kingdom. I was already halfway to being allies with them, and now it was time to officially add them into Orsted's camp.

Who first? Cliff, of course—he was stationed nearby. Making Cliff an ally would give us ties to the Millis Church. The Holy Country of Millis was powerful, which would make them a powerful force in the war against Laplace, too. Battles came down to money and numbers, after all. Having some connections who could provide both wouldn't hurt.

Cliff might have said otherwise, but I considered him a close friend. He was already helping out with Orsted's curse, so a verbal agreement was probably all I needed to get him fully aboard. I could already hear him say "Sure" with no hesitation in my head. With my plan settled, I made my way toward the apartment where Cliff lived.

I arrived at Cliff's love nest. It was a rare moment of me not catching them in the act; the afternoon apartment was silent enough to hear a pin drop. Then again, if they went at it every day, his neighbors probably wouldn't get much rest... Wait! I'd misremembered. They typically did it in the school's research room this time of day. Maybe it only got busy around here at night?

When I entered his room, I was greeted by a gaunt, exhausted Cliff. "Oh, hey, Rudeus..."

He seemed like he was doing all right during Elinalise's pregnancy right up until his child's birth, but lately, he'd been white as a sheet every time I saw him. I was starting to worry about his stamina outside the bedroom, too.

"Oh, Rudeus. What's the occasion?" asked Elinalise.

Elinalise, on the other hand, had a healthy glow. She had a satisfied look on her face as she held her baby up to her breast. She was naked above the waist, and wore only a pair of panties below it. It seemed like I'd caught them in a short break; they were probably going to pick up where they left off once lunch was over.

"Ah, well, I had something to discuss," I explained. That said, I was distracted—the sight of this blonde, dainty beauty bestowing her baby with a nipple was high art. It belonged in a museum. Her lithe elven body certainly didn't help. The tension between her usual sluttery and the almost saintly scene before me was captivating.

Seeing Sylphie and Roxy breastfeed gave me that same feeling. Even Eris had been showing that sort of tension lately; she carried that baby and let him get away with suckling her teat without so much as a shout or a slap. Yes, the sight of a woman becoming a mother and offering a breast to her child is enchanting.

"Hey, Rudeus, could you stare a bit less intensely?" asked Cliff.

"Huh? Oh, sorry."

I'd gotten too lost in thought, and Cliff snapped me back to reality. My bad. I wasn't looking out of horniness. Seriously.

"And Lise, we have a guest over, so could you put some clothes on?"

"Oh my, Cliff... Are you getting jealous?"

"Yes, I am. You might only see Rudeus as family, though..."

Elinalise's shoulders slumped. "Fine, if you insist."

She retreated with her baby into an inner room.

"Rudeus, could you please refrain from looking at my wife like a piece of meat when you already have three wives of your own?"

"Piece of meat? Hey, listen—"

I tried to explain that I had done no such thing, but the fact was that I did look. I wouldn't want people looking at my wives naked

either, so it was better to apologize.

“Never mind, I’m sorry. I’ll keep that in mind next time.”

“Right...”

Cliff heaved a sigh as he sank into his sofa. He was certainly tired, but he also seemed to be in a sour mood. Maybe he was having some technical difficulties during his nightlife.

“So, what did you come for today?” he asked.

“Oh, well, I just had a little request. An invitation, if you will...”

Cliff stared back at me with vacant eyes. It felt kind of hard to broach the subject. I considered coming back later, but I figured I ought to ask why he seemed so bothered first.

“Did...something happen?”

“Nah, nothing...” Cliff started, but he shook his head and began again. “On second thought, your timing’s perfect. It’s something I have to tell you about anyway.”

It felt like he was leading into something serious, like how Zanoba was recently summoned by his family.

“The truth is...a letter came in from my grandfather in the Holy Country of Millis.”

It was following the same pattern, too. That could only mean one thing: this was designed to lure Cliff away. Was it another war? Or was it a trap laid by the Man-God? No matter. Either way, I was planning to ask Cliff to build some bridges between me and the Holy Country of Millis. He apparently had the same idea, so he wouldn’t waste time by asking me to tag along. I would have liked for him to stay in Sharia, of course, but I had a goal to pursue.

Cliff stood up and pulled a single letter from off his shelf. It gave me another hit of déjà vu. I could guess the contents of the letter without reading a single word. *Do you know how much money it cost your grandfather to raise you? And why it cost money? So that you would grow to be an asset to our faction. And when do we need that asset? Right now!*

I had to prepare for the worst before looking.

“Oh, it’s not that serious a problem or anything,” Cliff said as he gave his cheek a nervous scratch. He seemed to feel a bit guilty. “It’s just that we agreed a long time ago that I’d return once I graduated. I’m

only worried about my travel budget and any dangers on the road.”

I took a look at the letter.

It started off asking after Cliff's health. After that, it instructed him to show the enclosed insignia of the Millis Faith Curia at a Millis Church if he ever ran low on travel funds. It said Millishion was currently embroiled in a power struggle and that they were on the losing side. Then, a stern warning: Cliff had to prepare for the worst if he intended to come home, and if he couldn't, then he shouldn't bother. Cliff's grandfather concluded the letter by saying that despite the harsh words, he longed to see Cliff again and that he was awaiting his return from the bottom of his heart.

Every word on the page bled concern for Cliff. I'd never met Cliff's grandfather, but if he could write such a heartfelt letter, then I was sure he had to be a good person. What could be the problem with this?

“Honestly, I've been going back and forth,” said Cliff, apparently referring to the part about preparing for the worst. “I was planning to return home the moment I graduated. It's what I'd trained so hard for. It's what I'd wanted this whole time until now. I was confident that I could even make it in the cutthroat world of the Millis Church.”

“Figures,” I said. Cliff had been talking about it from the beginning; once he graduated the academy, he'd return to the Holy Country of Millis and follow in his grandfather's footsteps... Though of course, he understood how difficult papal succession had become lately, so he'd been diligently training for the humble profession of priesthood as well.

“But,” Cliff continued as he sat back down on the couch and held his head in his arms, “I've gotten married. I even have a child.”

I instantly understood what he was worried about. It was the same kind of worry that I'd always been plagued by.

“The Millis Church, they have no qualms with targeting the families of the weak...of their enemies.”

“...”

“Lise would be fine, she knows how to protect herself. But Clive, he's not old enough to walk on his own two feet. I'm—I'm not confident that I can protect him.”

I understood his concern. You always want to keep your loved

ones safe.

“I haven’t even told my grandfather I’m married. If word got out that the Millis pope’s grandson got married to an elf, he could have a scandal on his hands. One that could force him to flee the country.”

The Millis faith was pretty rough on other races. Elves might typically face less discrimination due to being a forest-dwelling race, but I’d heard that there were extremists who persecuted them just because they weren’t human. And given that Elinalise wasn’t exactly in great standing among the elves, the reality awaiting Cliff and his family was harsh.

“I’ve been thinking about it over and over. Should I go back, should I not go back. Then Lise comforts me when I just don’t know anymore... It’s all I’ve been thinking about lately. It’s a bit late to realize this, but I think I get what made Zanoba so stubborn about going back to Shirone...”

I was sure that Cliff personally wanted to return, even if he wasn’t set on it. But doing so would put his wife and son in danger; worse yet, his choice of wife could even put his grandfather at risk. Would it be right to stay committed to his old dreams? Impossible to say. Even I didn’t know the answer. But what I came here to discuss also touched upon that very question. I was finally in a position to offer him a lifeline.

“Cliff?”

“...What?”

“I’d like to you to join Orsted’s army in a formal capacity.”

Cliff stared blankly in response. It might have been a clunky choice of words on my part, but I didn’t want to confuse him by asking him to “join my cause” or something. I had to be clear.

“What do you mean?”

“If you become Orsted’s subordinate, then Orsted and I can offer you our full support. You’ll be able to protect Elinalise and Clive while also leading your grandfather’s camp to victory.”

Cliff furrowed his brow. “If I accepted your help, what would I need to do?”

“Once you assume power, you’ll have to prepare for Laplace’s eventual resurrection.”

From there, I explained my plan—the one centered on Orsted eighty years from now. I'd mentioned the Man-God to Cliff before, but this time, I explained everything in detail from the beginning.

"..." Once I was done telling him everything, Cliff looked deep in thought.

"So, what do you think?" I asked.

Cliff didn't answer right away; he crossed his arms, closed his eyes, and mumbled in consternation. "Hmm..."

I thought it was a pretty good deal. Cliff knew that his vague disdain for Orsted was due to Orsted's curse. He didn't know what Orsted was really like without the curse...but even if you took him out of the equation, I wouldn't betray Cliff. I would've been sad if he had questions about that.

"Can...can you give me some more time?" Cliff asked, as though his response was being pried out of him after all that deep thought. "The graduation ceremony's happening soon. I'll make a decision by then."

He gave me a clear deadline, so I had no choice but accept it. I had to wonder why he couldn't let himself simply nod and agree, but perhaps Cliff himself didn't understand his hesitation.

"In that case, you should talk it over with Elinalise, too," I said. "There's no reason to carry the whole burden yourself."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, that's right. Thanks."

This time, Cliff simply nodded as a faint smile crept across his face.

Elinalise probably overheard our discussion. I'd noticed flashes of blonde hair peeking out from behind a cracked-open door down the hall. I was sure that someone like her could make Cliff see sense. They might not end up where I'd like...but hey, that'd be fine, too.

"All right, I'll come back later."

"Sure. Sorry about all this," said Cliff.

"Don't worry. I know it's hard, but we're all in this together."

With that, I left Cliff's room—though, not before giving the heads up to Elinalise.

I'd wait until the graduation ceremony for Cliff's answer. That was

about two months out, so I figured I'd get things rolling on another project. For that one, I needed Zanoba's assistance.

Chapter 2: The Zanoba Store

ZANOBA WAS NO LONGER a prince. He'd been spending his days pawning off his royal relics so he could build a house near my own—a stout, two-story place. He designed it with figurine production in mind, so the first floor was wide and spacious, like a garage. The living space was primarily on the second floor, where he planned to house Ginger, Julie, and himself. It seemed roomy enough for the three of them. I didn't know how their relationships would change over time, though; might get a little strange if any of them got married.

Anyway, while he had enough money for now (whether it was from savings or from a royal allowance), it was only going to down from here. I decided to pay rent to him for the Magic Armor production, which I also categorized as research costs. Zanoba accepted the money, but not without some objection.

"I'm not the only one working on this, so I can't help but feel it wrong to be the one to accept money for it," he said with a pensively raised brow.

I caught his drift; the creation of the Magic Armor was a team effort between Zanoba, Cliff, and myself. But here, only Zanoba was receiving R&D funding. It didn't add up.

But by that logic, what really didn't add up was me. I went out and did work in the Magic Armor, and I was the one getting compensated for it. In other words, I was the only one receiving money from the Magic Armor's creation until now. A creation that we had all worked together to make. The Magic Armor wasn't created for financial gain, but it's in our nature as humans to go at each other's throats over an extra coin. If I wanted to be fair about it, then I should have paid Cliff, too. Though Cliff was hardly pressed for money, of course, so I wasn't sure he'd take it.

Well, that aside.

There are times in life where you just have to pay up if you're asked. And hey, nobody I knew was greedy enough to take advantage of myself. I had enough wiggle room in my pocketbook to be charitable.

Yes, we all have a duty to give back when we've got some financial freedom.

Either way, I needed the Magic Armor, and I also needed Zanoba's figurine-engineering skills. It's only natural to pay money for something you need. And with that, I could consider Zanoba's lifestyle paid for.

I now stood before the front door of that figurine engineer's home. I took a deep breath. I'd been told I was free to enter as I pleased, even when the head of the house was absent. But there was one rule: knock before entry. It was simply proper etiquette between two amicable compatriots.

"Zanobaaa, yooahoo! Open up already!" I shouted, calling for Zanoba as I clanged the doorbell.

"Oh, Master. Please, by all means. The door's already open."

His response was incredibly quick. However, I needed a little more than that.

"You suuure? Can I reeeally come inside? Watch out, I'm gonna dooo iiii! Stop me while you caaan! Once I get staaarted, I can't hold myself baaaack!"

Not getting consent last time led to a mishap I nearly could have been locked up over.

"I have no idea what you could possibly be referring to, but I won't stop you, so do come in."

"You sure? There's no woman next to you getting dressed, is there?"

"You've nothing to worry about."

I felt that. I believed Zanoba. That's right, I'd place my trust in him once again. In the man who never stopped believing in me when I got that diary from the future. If black became white and the world were inverted, I'd know that there was still a lone man worth believing in: Zanoba.

"Okie-doke, here I come."

I opened the door. This place was Zanoba's workshop from the first step inside; it was a wide-open space with two work desks amidst a sea of wooden boxes and figurines strewn all over. Zanoba sat in front of one of the desks. Julie was with him.

That alone wouldn't have been out of the ordinary, but the atmosphere about the workshop was a bit different today. If I had to put my finger on it, I'd say the problem was in where Julie was sitting. Normally, Julie would be making figurines at the desk just a short distance away from Zanoba's.

But today, she wasn't sitting at that desk.

"..."

Julie was sitting on Zanoba's lap. She was sitting on his lap while looking intently at the figurine she was painting.

Zanoba, by the way, was carefully carving away at a Magic Armor part above her head. The scraps of his carvings were dropping on top of her head, but Julie didn't seem to notice.

"Zanoba... You sure got close to Julie while I wasn't looking, huh?"

"Hm? Does that pose a problem?"

Julie's small frame nested within Zanoba's tall stature. They looked like siblings. Wholesome! You know, as long as the only thing they did in that position was make figurines together... But yeah, it was safe to say that there was no hint of lewdness here. I mean, not that it'd have been a problem for them if there had been. This world didn't have any age of consent laws, so nobody would've held it against him.

But, just, you see...I did knock, so I wish they could've separated a little.

"Nah, you're a heartwarming sight," I said as I pulled up a chair from the corner of the workshop.

"So, Master, what brings you here today?"

"About that..."

Of course, I didn't come to Zanoba's to talk about the weather. I'd already tasked him with the Magic Armor manufacturing project, but I had another job I wanted to give him that he'd work on in parallel.

"The truth is, Zanoba, I came to inform you of your new position."

"Huh... Position, you say?"

"Yes, position," I confirmed as I pulled a single piece of paper out of my breast pocket. I held it up to Zanoba as though it were an offering.

“Ah, pardon my manners!” said Zanoba. He hurriedly plopped Julie down and brushed the scrapings off of himself before gracefully accepting the paper. The guy had a sense of refinement.

“Hmm...” murmured Zanoba. “It says that ‘Zanoba Shirone is to be assigned to the Figurine Sales Department.’”

“Indeed. I implore you to accept.”

“I wouldn’t be unwilling to do so...but did we not intend to postpone that project?”

This reassignment effectively meant that we’d begin moving forward with the plans to sell those Ruijerd figurines that we had made so long ago. He might have wondered why we were doing that now, at this moment. But actually, selling those specific figurines at this specific time was crucial. We were going to be enlisting leaders from around the world while also nabbing every ally we laid eyes on for the battle against Laplace. However, there were a few people whose whereabouts were unknown. Including, yes, Ruijerd.

Ruijerd spent typical timelines on the Demon Continent, but in this loop, he warped with me to the Central one. I hadn’t heard from him lately, nor did I know where he was. I didn’t think there was any chance of the worst coming to pass with him, but the fact remained that I couldn’t meet him and ask for his help right this very moment.

Well, it wasn’t like he was in hiding. We could find him easily with just a little searching. But I couldn’t deny it; he was the first person I wanted to ask for help in defeating Laplace. This was Ruijerd, after all—Laplace and him had a history together. I wanted to do whatever it took to find him and ask him directly. I wanted to give him the chance to get his revenge...

Well, that was half an excuse. Deep down, I really just wanted to see Ruijerd again after all these years. And maybe a mutual goal could set us side by side on the same path again, if only for just a little while. So my motives were selfish, but that was how we began selling the Ruijerd figurines. And hey, it was sure to be faster than organizing a search party. Not to mention that repairing the image of the Superd was something I’d been planning for a while...

I had other excuses for Zanoba too, just in case he needed more convincing. Take, for example, the Magic Armor; Me, Zanoba, and Cliff had all reached a standstill in the development of this weapon. There

was a very real possibility that the Version Three wouldn't be completed at all. But what luck! In came these large-scale plans to sell figurines; reaching the scale required for distribution and sales meant hiring and training engineers. Remember, the engineering techniques for dolls and figurines could be carried right over to the engineering of the Magic Armor. By increasing the number of specialists who understood our engineering and having more iterations for trial and error, we increased the odds of finding a revolutionary breakthrough. Developing talent was key.

"And that about covers the plan," I concluded. I had just finished explaining all of that in great detail to Zanoba. "While I do have personal reasons for wanting to do this, I want to grow our engineering expertise for the Magic Armor project. I wanted to ask you because you understand this better than anyone else."

"Hmm..."

"I'll search the Ruquag Mercenary Band for someone with prior business experience to support you. And of course, Aisha and I will help you to get the first store up and running. So...will you do it?"

"Indeed! It shall be done."

Zanoba nodded without hesitation and kneeled before me. Julie, after watching from the sidelines, hurriedly took to her own knee as well.

"Grand Master! What is it that I shall do?" she chirped.

"Julie, you are to stay with Zanoba and follow his directions!"

"Okay!"

It looked like Julie was all in as well. We'd be heading into mass production of the first lot of Ruijerd figurines soon, which meant that she'd be working to make Zanoba money. She'd surely be excited to hear that.

"All right then, we'll go over the details on a later date. That's all for today."

"Understood."

Next, I figured I would bring over that mercenary that I'd had my eye on...

Several days later, I returned to Zanoba's house with two people in tow. On one side was a fearful-looking man in round glasses; he shaped his hair into a 7:3 part instead of a bowl cut. He wore a black coat with yellow embroidery. He was clearly human.

"This is where you'll be working from now on."

"A-all right..."

"Listen well, Joseph. It would be no exaggeration to say that this massive project rests upon your shoulders," I said.

Joseph gulped.

"But you needn't worry more than necessary," I continued. "After all, to our great benefactor, this is but one project of many."

This was Joseph: an anxious temperament and a nasty drinking problem combined to make him frequently pallid, which led to "Pale" becoming a cutesy nickname of his among the mercenaries. Before joining the Mercenary Band, he was a merchant. Merchants in this world typically started their careers as traveling salesmen. If they saved their money and gained enough status in their guilds or trades, they could become the employee or apprentice of a high-profile merchant, and by amassing even more resources and experience, they could finally open their own store. If a store owner could maintain that momentum, they could end up owning a larger store, becoming a company executive, or even being selected as a personal supplier for the royal family.

Joseph seemed to have made it to the store ownership stage, but then he made one big mistake that cost him everything. Whenever he was asked where he went wrong he'd always shut down and go silent. But there was no doubt that it was over a woman; or so Linia had told me. Of course, if you knew Linia's reputation, her theories had the strength of a wet paper bag. My guess was that his mistake involved alcohol. He might have drunken himself into a stupor and put his hands on a female employee, only to find out it was a setup to get dirt on him...

Wait. That sounded like what Linia told me.

Never mind.

Either way, after losing it all, Joseph here wandered around until finding his way to the Mercenary Band. According to Aisha, he was incredibly skilled at management and finances, so it didn't seem like he was lying about owning a store. And considering how high Aisha's standards for skills were, that praise meant a lot. Well... On second thought, Aisha considered *me* skilled, so that's what that praise was worth. Anyway, this all led to him getting picked out from the crowd to be the advisor for the grand opening of Zanoba's first store.

"A-are you sure?" asked Joseph, his wan face living up to his nickname. "I've heard that Mr. Zanoba can be a fearsome individual... That when he gets angry, he'll flatten people into the ceiling, like pancakes..."

"Joseph, my boy, those are merely rumors," I reassured him. "In what world would a man slam someone into the ceiling when angered? If someone was truly angry, wouldn't they slam people into the *ground* instead? Exactly! The ground's much harder."

"Y-you're right, yeah..."

Of course I was right. Zanoba only slammed people into the ceiling when jumping for joy. His preferred move when angry was an iron claw to the face.

"That said, it's best to not get him angry in the first place. But that goes for anyone, no? You've been a salesman before, so I'm sure you agree that it's best to keep your customers smiling?"

"No...no, there times where it's best to anger them."

"Are there, now?"

"P-people can make poor decisions when they're angry. Especially enemies. Getting them angry can cloud their judgment and give you the upper hand in negotiations."

Interesting. Might apply to enemies. But we weren't talking about enemies, now, were we?

"Is Zanoba an enemy?" I asked.

"N-no! My apologies. I didn't mean to be pedantic..."

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about. I *was* wrong, after all. Yes, some enemies are best handled when they're angry, very true."

"R-right... But of course, Mr. Zanoba is no enemy...so I do intend

to avoid angering him... It's just that, when I was with the mercenaries, everything I did got someone mad at me..."

True, he didn't seem like he'd fit in easily with the reckless heroes that made up our mercenary band. Probably because he was so timid and reserved. I remember how awful he was during my first interview with him after Aisha suggested him to me: the color on his face as he entered the captain's room had gone past Pale and straight to White, like he was a walking corpse. He started the conversation from the assumption that he was surely about to be punished for some mistake he'd made, so he kept a faint, rictus smile pinned to his lips at all times as he kissed ass. I had my doubts about the guy, to say the least. Even Aisha attempted to walk back her recommendation of him.

He was a salesman dropout. That is to say, he was a screwup. Advice from failures is usually unreliable. If someone didn't understand exactly why they failed, then they were liable to repeat their mistakes. I was speaking from experience. But failure was also a fact of life. The maturity of someone with a lot of failures to draw from is worth its weight in gold. We'd never grow if we let failure stop us. You didn't need a hundred percent success rate; sixty percent is still a passing mark, even when the "test" is changing the world.

A taste of success changes people. I felt that if I could give this man that taste, he'd grow into an exceptional asset. I chose him for this project not in spite of his past, but *because* of it.

"Our benefactor is forgiving of failures, and he makes sure success doesn't go unrewarded. If you're able to make this project a success, you could find yourself managing the mercenary band's marketing division."

"Wh-why, I'm not certain I'd be fit for that position."

"Perhaps. But you didn't refuse the opportunity. You're here. That speaks for itself."

It was quite the profound line to end on, if I did say so myself.

Well, it was profound until a certain *someone* ruined it. That "someone" was Linia.

"Don't sweat it, mew! Zanoba's like a little bro to mew. Keep your chin up, and if anything happens, just lemme at 'im. I'll give him the ol' one-two, mew!"

For some reason, she tagged along when I first set this project up, acting like some business guru the whole time. Considering that her first foray into an honest line of work ended before it ever started, her bluster made her come off as a know-it-all novice.

“Boss... Thank you so much. I feel so relieved.”

Joseph seemed comforted that she was here, and she *did* have some authority I didn’t want to undermine, so for the moment, I decided to let her talk nonsense without interjecting. She was getting the boot if she got in the way, though.

“Now then, shall we enter?” I suggested. I wanted to avoid any further wavering, so I opened the door.

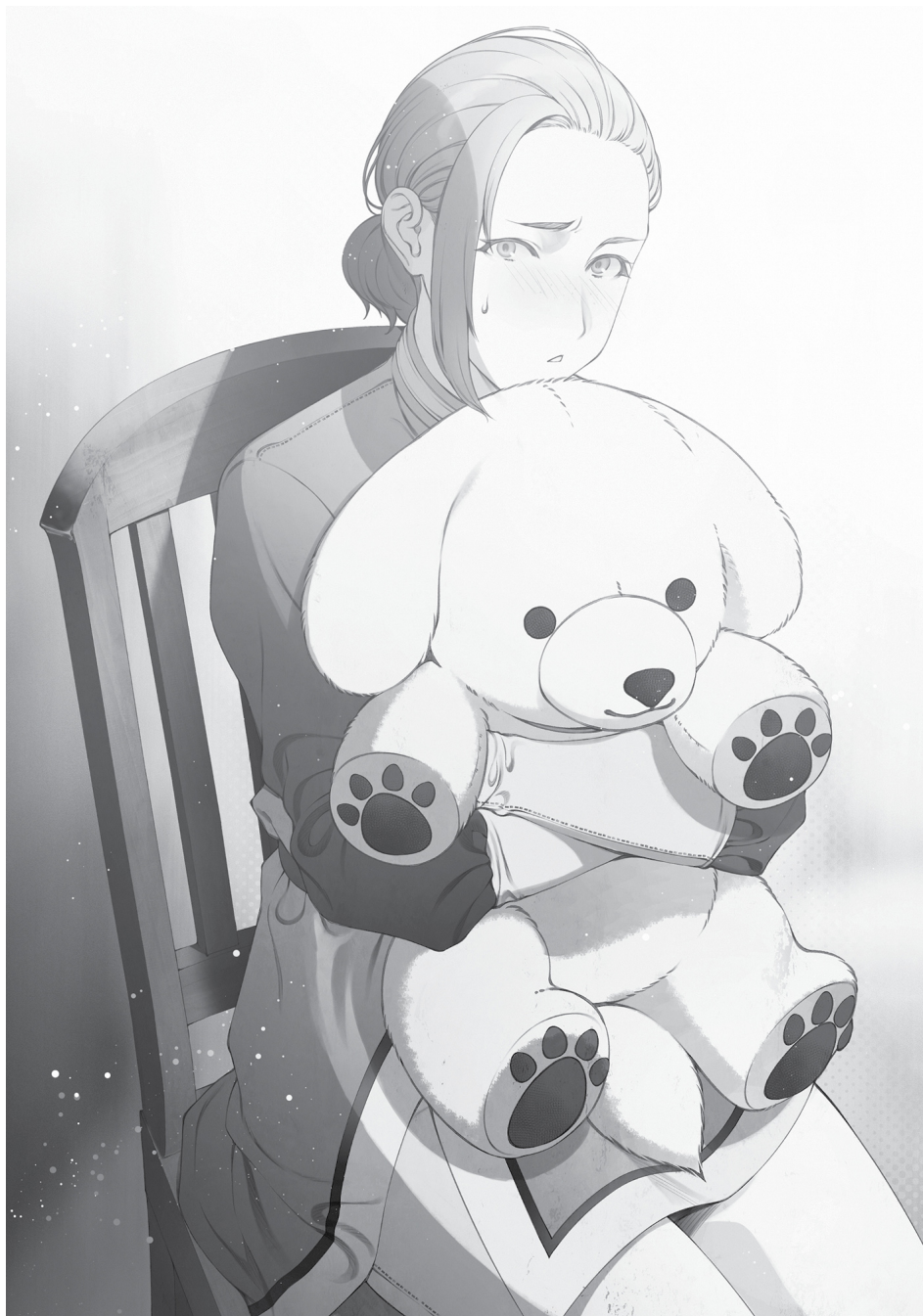
“Hey, Zanoba, you know that thing we talked about—”

It was then that I realized: I had messed up. Once again, I had opened the door without knocking. And before our eyes, beyond the door that had opened with a clank, lay an unbelievable sight.

Inside the first floor of Zanoba’s home were Zanoba and Julie, who were sitting down and working on their own figurines. This time, she wasn’t sitting on Zanoba’s lap. That part was fine.

But someone else made me stop in my tracks the moment I entered: Ginger. She was lovingly holding an adorable plush dog.

“Wh-what is it?” she asked suspiciously.



Ginger. With a stuffed animal. Oh no, that wasn't to say they didn't belong together, but it *was* an unexpected sight. I felt like I'd walked in on something. I could have sworn that Ginger had no interest in these sorts of things. Maybe Zanoba no longer being a prince had given her a change of heart.

Yes, after calming down and giving it some thought, it felt natural. Besides, it wasn't right to judge someone for their tastes.

"Gah ha ha ha! What's a knight doin' coddling a stuffed animal, mew?! What is she, a bab—Mew?! Boss, what's the big idea, mew, just wait a sec—"

I gave Linia the boot.

Incidentally, beastfolk had a form of play in which they practiced hunting on dolls of demons and animals. It was a game that *very* small children would play. So I couldn't hold it against her; she wasn't making fun of *Ginger's* tastes. She was just speaking from her experience as a beastwoman. Not to say that her words had no bite. Ginger glowed with unbearable humiliation. I had to cheer her back up.

"*Ahem*, that's a lovely stuffed animal you have there. From where might you have procured it?"

Ooh, I sounded a bit like Zanoba there.

"It...was an import from the Asura Kingdom. Its creator was someone named Venger, who used blanket rags to make dolls like this, or something..."

"Venger, eh? Quite a similar name to 'Ginger,' isn't it?"

"Yes. That's why I've taken a bit of a liking to it... Is it really that childish?"

"Oh, by no means. Pay no attention to what some insensitive cat tells you. She has no taste. I believe you should love what you love."

"Oh... Yes, thank you very much."

I could tell that Zanoba had a smile on his face as he overheard us. It was the face of a hobbyist watching a friend fall down the rabbit hole of a hobby of their own; he must have been happy to see Ginger take an interest in dolls. Well, a stuffed animal. Not *quite* a doll.

"Rudeus, who might this person be?" Joseph asked nervously.

"Ah, I'll introduce you. Zanoba!"

“Right!” Zanoba shouted back. He rose up the instant I called his name, dusted the shavings off of his clothes, and joined us. Julie trotted along behind him.

“This is Joseph. He’s one of the most knowledgeable people in the mercenary band when it comes to marketing. I’m assigning him to be your advisor for the figurine-selling project.”

“Hmm.” A glint of light shone in Zanoba’s glasses. He weighed Joseph with his gaze. Julie imitated Zanoba’s glare in miniature. Cute.

“Master, pardon my rudeness, but may I inquire as to his figurine expertise?”

“Total novice.”

“Well, now.” Zanoba raised an eyebrow. “I trust that you have your reasons, Master. Might I inquire as to why you chose a novice?”

This was unusual. Knowing Zanoba, I figured he would’ve accepted Joseph by the second reply. Something along the lines of trusting me to have my reasons, but choosing not to ask what they were.

“Pardon,” Zanoba continued, “but I simply must ask. This work is not mere child’s play to me, you see.”

“I’ll explain, of course.”

Zanoba was taking this job seriously. Joining Orsted’s army was a step toward avenging Pax’s death, and that choice was *not* made lightly. Zanoba wasn’t putting his foot down just because he didn’t want a philistine who didn’t understand true art criticizing his work.

Right?

“First, as a former salesman, he’s well-versed in marketing. Second, he once failed as a salesman, so he’ll be careful. Last, as a complete novice to the world of figurines, he’ll be able to provide a fresh perspective.”

“A fresh perspective, you say?”

“Yes. The people this project aims to market to aren’t all going to be enthusiasts like you. They’ll mostly be casuals. Some of the people we’re aiming for might lack any interest in figurines whatsoever. The question is, how do we sell to those people? If we come up with an idea that wouldn’t make Joseph here want to buy it, then it wouldn’t sell to

other casuals, either.”

“I see! Another brilliant idea, Master. Indeed, sometimes an almost childlike perspective is necessary to spread art.”

Julie followed Zanoba’s lead with a profound nod of her head. I took this to mean that Zanoba had given the okay in his own way. Then again, we hadn’t even done anything yet, so there wasn’t much to greenlight.

“Joseph, this is Zanoba. He’ll be your boss from now on.”

“R-right! A pleasure to make your acquaintance! I promise to put my heart and soul into this work!”

Joseph gave Zanoba the Mercenary Band’s signature bow. It was beautifully done, a sign that Linia had been teaching them well.

“Indeed. I am Zanoba. Let us join hands and blanket the world with figurines.”

And with that, the two men shook hands.

But I had to hope Zanoba wasn’t mistaking the goal of this project here. Spreading figurines was important, but this was also supposed to be a separate source of income from the Mercenary Band, a way to ally with influential business organizations, and a way to train future engineers. Remember? Then again, I had my own reasons too—my goal was to see Ruijerd one more time. Wait, if marketing was the point here, then there’s no reason that figurines had to be our product of choice...

“Now then, let’s talk about the plan to open our first store.”

Introductions were out of the way, so it was time to get to work.

“First, these are going to be our main products. We want to sell these primarily to the common people.”

The three of us were gathered around a large desk in the studio that made up the first floor of Zanoba’s house. I placed a Ruijerd figurine and a single picture book on top of it. The book contained the tales of Ruijerd’s heroics that Norn had written.

“We plan to sell the book and the figurine as a set.”

It was an idea that I’d had brewing for a while. Of course, we had Norn’s permission to sell the book. This world might not have had copyright laws, but we should stick to some principles.

“I see...”

Joseph picked up the book and flipped through its pages.

“So...it’s a story about how the Superd weren’t actually terrifying devils, but instead the heroes who lead the world during the final battle? Are you sure it’s a good idea to sell this?”

“We’ve gotten permission.”

“Um... Whose?”

“Lord Perugius’s, of course.”

Joseph frowned. But who else was I supposed to ask? Lord Perugius was the only person in the book who was still alive. He was the only one who could give the rights to anyone’s likenesses.

Not that those rights existed in this world, but still.

“Um... Won’t this draw some flak from the Millis Church?”

“That’s true. There are people who won’t like us selling something that sings the praises of devils. But the Millis Church isn’t the only group that treats the Superd that way. And anyway, the story itself borrows passages from the Millis bible to show how the hero’s actions are right according to its teachings.”

Norn was a follower of Millis, so she sprinkled phrases of its teachings throughout her work. The story was respectful toward the faith; anyone who sat down and read it would come away thinking that Millis was a wonderful religion.

Too bad they wouldn’t accept me, though. Too many wives.

“Is that so... I’m not a follower of Millis so I can’t say either way, but if it does, that should be fine.”

Honestly, I was expecting we’d get Millis Justice Warriors bitching over every “problematic” detail regardless of whether they’d read the book or not. However, taking that crowd at face value is always a waste of time. I wanted this to sell. I wanted to restore the Superd tribe’s good name. If we couldn’t come together, then we’d inevitably fight each other.

“That said, we’re considering where and how to most effectively sell these... Joseph, we’d like to hear your honest opinion.”

Joseph looked back and forth between the figurine and the book as he thought. Eventually, he raised his head and gave it to us straight.

“They won’t sell. Not like this.”

Well now, this was a surprise.

“Now, listen—” Zanoba interjected with a threatening step forward.

“Now, now, give him a moment,” I said as I held Zanoba back. I wanted to hear the guy out.

“First off, books are never going to move. There aren’t even that many people who can read. You plan to sell this to casuals instead of enthusiasts, no? It could garner a few sales from the nobility class, but if your target audience is commoners, then it’ll be quite difficult...”

So, it’d only sell among nobles and enthusiasts, huh? That would’ve been fine if our only goal was money, but I was after something else. It’d defeat the purpose if the book could only reach a limited audience. Hmm...

“Master, might you have forgotten something?”

“Hm?”

A glint of light shone across Zanoba’s glasses. Not on purpose. His glasses just reflected more light after he stepped forward.

“I believe you once suggested that we could attach something like this along to the book...”

Zanoba took the book Joseph was holding and flipped through it. He stopped on the final page; Joseph held his breath as Zanoba spread its contents out for the rest of us.

“Is this...a reading worksheet?”

Oh, yes. This was a worksheet designed for learning to read. It contained pronunciations, grammar rules, stroke order, and even practice exercises. It wasn’t going to teach someone to breeze through academic tomes, but they should be able to read something simple by studying alongside it.

Honestly, I was pretty proud of it. This felt like an achievement. The theory summarized on that worksheet was what taught *Ghislaine*

Dedoldia, of all people, to read. Enough said.

“Reading textbooks differ from country to country, but this is rather easy to understand. If this comes with the book, then I think we can consider our literacy hurdles cleared.”

Joseph nodded with respect. *Aww, you’re makin’ me blush.*

However, his gaze grew stern when he considered the figurine.

“But to be perfectly honest, I don’t believe that selling the book and the figurine together is going to work. The people who want the book will be different from the people who want the figurine...”

“Of *course*,” I sighed. That should’ve been obvious. It could even bother people to be stuck with a bulky figurine when all they wanted to buy was a book.

“But wait,” Zanoba objected. “We can’t know until we try, can we? Considering that it teaches people to read, I’m sure many people would purchase it for their children. Including a figurine to catch their children’s attention shouldn’t be entirely disregarded.”

“I see, children... Yes, that’s an idea.” Joseph nodded at Zanoba’s suggestion. “But in that case, shouldn’t the figurine be a little more palatable to children? This one is just a tad scary.”

Joseph fiddled with the figurine’s head as he spoke, but he shuddered when the figure’s carefully sculpted hair piece popped out of its slot.

“Would this not be perfect for a young boy who dreams of becoming a hero?” asked Zanoba.

“Boys aren’t the only children in the world, though. I think it’d be best to have another figurine that girls would want.”

One that girls would want, huh? I guess something fashionable, like a Blairbie doll. Or maybe something small and cute in a mascot character sort of way? I wasn’t too sure what young girls liked. I made a note to ask Lucie about what she’d want later.

As we worked, I could tell Joseph’s sense of trepidation from earlier had vanished. He and Zanoba seemed to make a better pair than I’d expected. Just to make sure, I tried staying silent and letting them discuss it between themselves.

“So, what format do you plan to sell these in?” asked Joseph.

“For now, we want to sell these normally in a store. Should we have spare stock, we could also start an open-air stall to sell them.”

“A stall, you say? I’m afraid... No, there are many adventurers who can’t read, so that should work. Most didn’t have the opportunity to attend school.”

“Where do you suppose a good location for the store would be?”

“Somewhere with plenty of foot traffic would be a good start, but I’ve been told that gaining more engineers is another goal of this project. In that case, a good place to open the first shop here in Sharia should be the workshop district.”

“We wish to expand our capacity as a workshop. We’re prepared to go into mass production, and if resources allow, we’ll even go right for opening a store on the main street,” said Zanoba.

“Yes, I see that. The problem would be where *exactly* on the main street we would open the store... We won’t make many friends in the Commerce Guild if we come out of nowhere and throw money around to land a good spot. But location *is* important...”

“Hmm. Then perhaps we could consider the Asura Kingdom?”

“W-well, true, securing a store in the Asura Kingdom would draw more customers than Sharia ever could—but once the shipping costs are factored in, it’s impractical. It would take months to travel to the Asura Kingdom from here...”

“If that’s the trouble, then we could simply manufacture in the Asura Kingdom as well. Fortunately, the master and I are old acquaintances with the land’s next ruler. It’ll be easier to work there than in Sharia,” said Zanoba.

Joseph glanced at me. “I was told you were a mysterious bunch, but this is... No, never mind. They don’t call you the Right Hand of the Dragon God for nothing. But yes, attaining some achievements in the Asura Kingdom could make it easier to operate in Sharia, so...”

The two were working out the details between themselves without even noticing that I’d backed off. Zanoba would listen to Joseph’s ideas, offer his kudos, and then summarize his own thoughts. Joseph seemed to be far livelier here than he ever was in the Mercenary Band.

Yes, it was looking like I’d made the right call. Seeing how nervous he was during that interview had me a bit concerned, but he

really did love business. Loving something is the first step toward getting good at it. He might fail again...but that'd be fine in its own way.

"All right, I believe that shall settle our plans for now. What say you, Chairman?"

Whoops, I'd spaced out. I glanced at Ginger and Julie for a hint. Julie had a worried look on her face, as though she didn't quite understand what was going on. Ginger's expression, however, was unconcerned.

"Ginger, what's your take?" I asked.

"I can't say for sure since I'm still early in my studies...but from what I've heard, I think it should go well."

Oh, so she'd been studying. *You go, Ginger.* I needed to find a chance to keep up my studies as well. And the spare time to do it.

"Good point," I said "My business studies have been lacking, so I can't make the call. We should tell our plans to Aisha for now, and if she gives us the rubber stamp, we'll move forward from there."

I'd go ask Aisha for her thoughts as reference. Until then, I had a bit of studying to do about trade in this world. It wouldn't make me more than a novice, though. A novice is better referring to their reading than to their own judgment.

What was important was that I could be content with hiring Joseph as our advisor for now. Our advisor who came with Aisha's seal of approval, at that. Zanoba, the manager of the project, agreed with the decision. The only action left for me as the leader of the project was to approve it all and wait for the results.

"Zanoba, Joseph, I hate to dump all the work on you, but I'll let you two handle the business side. I hope you can set this project on the right path."

"As you wish!"

"I-I'll try!"

"If you need any resources, personnel, or connections, don't hesitate to ask. I'll make something happen for you."

I wasn't planning to dump all the work onto them. If anything, I wanted to run this project myself, but there were too many other things

I had to do. Handling them all myself wasn't an option. There were sure to be more ventures that I'd have to trust my employees to operate, so this was an important first step for me.

"Chairman, when the time comes to prepare our store, I believe a name will be necessary. Can you think of an exciting one?"

I ventured, "Uh... The Zanoba Store?"

"Oh."

Christened and ready for launch. Of all the things we could name a store, this was definitely one of them.

With the discussion wrapped up, I turned to leave and found my eyes meeting a pair that were peeking in from a crack in the door. Oops.

"Sorry, I forgot," I apologized as I opened the door. Linia glared at me at first, but she sighed and slumped her shoulders soon enough.

"Well, it looks like Joseph got a warm welcome, so I can't complain, mew."

"My, it's almost like you've matured."

"Of course I have! I'm the boss of the Mercenary Band. It's part of my job to make sure my men don't get purrsecuted at their new posts, mew."

I see, so that was why she tagged along. If that was her motivation, I felt kind of bad about kicking her out. Still, I was impressed that Linia had already started to take her position at the top of an organization seriously. My joy at this development stuck with me all the way home.

The Zanoba Store's first outlet was located in the workshop district. For the building, we modified a warehouse on the workshop district's outskirts. Our focus in the Magic City of Sharia would be headquarters and workshop duties, with plans to further expand into the Asura Kingdom later on. I'd probably need to call on Ariel for her assistance.

The Ruijerd figurine project was now out of my hands. I was

nervous because it was still in its infancy, but I let it go and prayed it wouldn't end in disaster.

Chapter 3:

Cliff and the Institute of Magic Student Council

THAT DAY, Cliff visited the teachers' office. Graduation loomed on the horizon, so it was time for the special students to submit their research reports. The subject of Cliff's report was "Research into the Suppression of Curses via Magical Implements." The teachers immediately started poring over the report and passing copies around, all while giving Cliff glowing praise. The submission soon sparked an impromptu Q&A session and debate, whipping the staff room into a fervor. Cliff even heard one teacher say that the results of his research would make history. But the head teacher, Jenius, had something else to say.

"I apologize that I cannot do more in light of such groundbreaking research...but the valedictorian has already been selected."

This year's valedictorian would be someone named Brooklyn von Elzas from the Duchy of Neris. Cliff knew that name; it was someone he'd spent the past few years competing with over test scores. Cliff recalled that he'd never once lost to Brooklyn.

"I'm sorry. Perhaps this might not be the place to speak of it, but you held the most outstanding grades out of the entire graduating class. You should be proud."

Cliff's only response to this news was an "all right, I see," before leaving the staff room. The old Cliff might have thrown an almighty fit at the teachers, but the past seven years had changed him. Furthering his studies, making new friends, and working as a priest had given him many new experiences. From those experiences came maturity. The school had their position to consider. Running a university wasn't cheap. Countries were powerful. People were not equal. You had to accept your lot in life and press on.

Besides, Cliff didn't see much value in the "University of Magic Valedictorian" title. Cliff had friends who lacked titles but were no less amazing. One in particular currently had the title of "Right Hand of the Dragon God," but that wasn't a job he'd applied for. It was simply the outcome of his actions.

Absolutely. The fruit of experience. Thinking about it, Cliff couldn't help but laugh at how foolish chasing mere titles was.

He sighed aloud.

If he had one misgiving, it was that his research wasn't finished. His thesis was called "Research into the Suppression of Curses via Magical Implements." If he could have tweaked it just a bit, if he could have replaced "Suppression" with "Removal," then Cliff would have had no regrets. But sadly, his incomplete research meant he couldn't speak in absolutes. Still, he'd accomplished *something*. Both Elinalise and Orsted had thanked him for easing their curses. But the end goal still eluded his grasp.

"..."

Cliff sidled up to the windowsill and stared outside. The grounds of the University of Magic had hardly changed in the past seven years.

You know, he thought, *I was a lot cockier when I first came here.*

Back then, Cliff knew absolutely he was a genius. But the years had beaten him down, making him painfully aware that he was nothing special. Sure, compared to other students, his grades were exceptional. The old Cliff might have lorded it over others with a smirk. But the current Cliff didn't feel like boasting or demeaning himself. The past seven years had been so rich for him, filled with so many once-in-a-lifetime experiences. His marriage with Elinalise, his research on curses, the bizarre doll in Rudeus's manor, the battle on the Demon Continent, the Demon Eye he was given, the birth of Clive... There was just so much that had happened, so many things that he had to face with his whole heart to overcome. It was those challenges that made him the man he was today, not any inborn talent. Remembering that kept him grounded.

His experience might have been why Cliff was so well-regarded by his congregation when he worked as an apprentice Millis priest. They said that despite his youth, he had extraordinary empathy. Sometimes they even told him he'd grow up to be a fine priest. When the priest in charge of the Sharia church gave Cliff his priest certificate, he also gave him his blessing by saying, "You'll do fine anywhere you go." The priest would never have said that if Cliff were still the same boy he was seven years ago.

"Phew..."

A smile bubbled up from within Cliff. He still hadn't become the man he once dreamed of being—he was better than that man. He preferred this version of himself.

“Now, where to go from here...”

His research report was submitted, and there was now little time left until the graduation ceremony. Cliff had told Rudeus that he'd give an answer by graduation, but he had yet to settle on one. He wanted to return to Millishion. But he had a wife and child now. Cliff's parents had died in a power struggle within the Millis Church. Specifically, his grandfather's power struggle as the Millis pope. Returning to Millishion would absolutely put Elinalise and Clive in danger. And then Rudeus dropped a solution into Cliff's lap. He wanted Cliff to assist Orsted as a member of the Millis Church. To forge an alliance. If he could do that, then Rudeus would offer all the help needed for Cliff to rise through the ranks. He'd see to it that Elinalise and Clive were protected.

It was everything Cliff could ask for and more. But past arrogance aside, Cliff didn't see himself being worth that kind of support now. Certainly not from someone as amazing as Rudeus—Cliff may have had his doubts about Rudeus when they first met, but he was sincere and a hard worker. And it was no exaggeration to say that most of Cliff's “once-in-a-lifetime experiences” only happened because of Rudeus. Someone that extraordinary asking *Cliff* for help was probably a show of friendship more than anything else.

Still, this was everything he could have wanted. Elinalise and Clive would be safe, he'd have Orsted's formidable backing, and the road to the top of the Millis Church hierarchy would be wide open. It was everything Cliff wanted. And yet, something about it felt subtly off. Cliff didn't yet understand why that was.

What should he do? What did he want? Every day he agonized over it until it was time to go home to Elinalise and stop thinking.

“I guess I'll hang around for a bit longer.”

Cliff had planned to go straight home after submitting the report, but he turned sharply on his heel. If he went home now, then the day would end like all the others did. That wouldn't be good.

Saint Millis once said, “If childbirth be the duty of people, then shun it not, but indulge in it not.” Saint Millis also once said, “Let thyself anguish, and do not flee from thy anguish.” That meant that it

wasn't right to flee from his anguish and indulge in Elinalise. The phrase "Always let thy heart be at ease" was also in the teachings of Millis, so fraying his own nerves over this was no good either.

But he had to make a decision soon. A decision on how he would answer Rudeus's request.

"What do I *do*..."

Cliff had said that he'd decide after discussing it with Elinalise, but Elinalise had no comment either way. All she said was to think for himself. She said it not to abandon Cliff, but to give him a gentle push. If that was Elinalise's stance, then Cliff felt obligated to work this out on his own. Elinalise would live a very long time—many times longer than Cliff would. In fact, their child likely would as well. Compared to her experience, Cliff was a baby. Yet Elinalise never treated him like a child; she saw him as her beloved husband. Elinalise respected him, so Cliff wanted to return the favor.

"I can do this. I *am* a genius."

That phrase slipped out like a habit. It was once something he believed without question; now, it was a mantra to motivate him to action. He knew full well by now that he was no genius, but it cheered him up to repeat those old words and remember believing that they were true.

"I'm...we...should...!"

"Hm?"

Cliff faintly heard the echo of arguing voices from down the hall. Fights weren't particularly rare at the University of Magic. At any other time, Cliff would have ignored it. But in this moment, Cliff found himself drawn to it and descended the stairs. Among those voices was one Cliff recognized.

"That's what I said! We're the ones who should be doing this!"

"Exactly! We can't expect other people to wipe our ass! We've gotta protect this school ourselves!"

A number of students were shouting while gathered around a petite girl. They weren't threatening her, though; it seemed she was some kind of leader, so the others were pleading with her to make a call. And that girl was someone Cliff knew well.

"Please, President!"

“You have to let us go, President Norn!”

It was Norn Greyrat. She stood scowling, surrounded by the other students.

“Norn, what’s wrong?” Cliff called out. “Is there some sort of problem?”

All of the students, Norn included, turned to face Cliff. Her expression relaxed a bit, but other students stepped forward before she could respond.

“Who d’ya think you are?!”

“This is student council business!”

Standing in Cliff’s way was a girl about as tall as him and a beastman who might have been twice his height. Cliff recognized the two of them as well; they were current members of the student council.

“Hey, guys! Could you move, please?”

Norn wedged herself between the two and pried them apart so she could wriggle through. It was the kind of motion that Rudeus, if he were here, would have said a dumb pun to himself for, like “Wow, Norn’s really *come between you!*”

“I’m sorry, Cliff,” Norn said. “Everyone here’s just a bit worked up.”

“Cliff Grimor... This kid? The one from the Demonic Circle of Six?”

“He’s not just a ‘kid.’ He’s someone I owe a great deal to!”

“Oh... Sorry.”

The beastman muttered an apology, but kept his glare. The old Cliff might have responded to that look with hostility or fear. The current Cliff had seen worse. Things that would strike fear into any reasonable heart merely by existing. Compared to Orsted or Atofe, this beastman was a puppy.

“So, what happened?” Cliff asked. “Could you tell me, if it isn’t too much trouble?”

“Well...” Norn began. “The truth is, there are rumors that a ghost is haunting the school.”

“Hmm.”

Cliff had heard those rumors as well. Every night, people would hear moaning voices or rattling noises, or they'd see a translucent figure in the hall... so the stories went. In fact, there were even students who'd collapsed, sapped of all their mana. But it was far from uncommon at the University of Magic to see students passed out from excessive practice, and ghosts were a common rumor. Or so Cliff thought...

"So, next, well... When we went to investigate, we found a door deep within an unused underground storehouse that had a strong seal placed on it. When we opened it, Skeletons came out."

Norn fumbled over her words as she explained to Cliff. It was like she was hiding something. Cliff was sure she was, but he chose to let it go.

"Yeah, it sounds like you messed up. If something's heavily sealed, then whoever sealed it probably had a good reason for doing so."

A loud "Guh!" was heard from among the student council. It came from a feisty-looking girl with pigtails; she was probably the culprit who lifted the seal.

"For now, we got a teacher's help to reapply the seal," Norn continued, with a tone suggesting that this was where everything went wrong.

The door was sealed with Saint-tier barrier magic. A Wraith had slipped through that Saint-tier barrier and appeared outside. That meant it was probably a high-level Wraith lurking in that underground storehouse.

The university contacted the Magicians' Guild and requested professionals who could exterminate it. Or, that was the plan, but it'd hit a snag. Beginner-tier divine magic was more than enough to take down a typical Wraith, but high-level Wraiths were different beasts. If it was an A-rank Deadly Wraith inside that storehouse, they'd at least need Advanced-tier divine magic. Unfortunately, there weren't any Advanced-tier divine magicians in the Magicians' Guild.

The university gave up and contacted the Adventurers' Guild in the hopes of obtaining an Advanced-tier divine magician, but alas, this wasn't Millis; Advanced-tier divine magicians weren't exactly on every street corner here in the Northern Territories. To make it even worse, the Magicians' Guild complained about the idea. They'd have to call in a divine magician from a different town's branch. Borrowing a magician

from the Adventurers' Guild would hurt their reputation, they said. But even if the school could get the divine magician from another town to come, they wouldn't show up right away.

And so, the days passed...until the first victim appeared.

The cause was uncertain; maybe the seal hadn't been reapplied correctly, or maybe it'd been faulty since its first application. The victim was an unnamed female student who fell into a coma after the Wraith attacked her and drained her of her mana. Her only symptom was simple mana exhaustion, not anything life-threatening. She was back in class the next day.

But ever since, the victim count steadily climbed.

For the moment, it appeared that the Wraith was still warded within the seal and could only escape outside to attack students at a particular time of day. But Wraiths would steadily power up with each feast of human mana they consumed. If it continued to attack students, it would soon grow strong enough to break through and bring an army of Skeletons with it. The potential fallout could be catastrophic.

"That's why some among the student council have suggested that we should go down there and defeat the Wraith before that happens..." Norn concluded.

"I can at least use Beginner-tier divine magic!" chimed in one student.

"I bought some weapons from the workshop district that are strong against Wraiths!" chimed in another.

"This is what we've been studying magic for!" added one more.

"President, please, give us the word!"

Wraiths were by no means impossible to fell by methods besides divine magic. Normal attacks had some small effect, and magical items or implements would inflict damage. In that sense, a divine magician was not *strictly* necessary to exterminate a Wraith.

"Hmm, I see," said Cliff. "Well, what do you think?"

"I'm against it," stated Norn. "If this monster were something we could handle on our own, then the Magicians' Guild and the teachers surely wouldn't be waiting on some divine magician."

"You've got that right," agreed Cliff. Divine magic might not have

been the only method, but it was far and away the most effective. A seasoned adventurer wouldn't even try to fight a Wraith without a divine magician or a lot of preparation. They were that dangerous. And this was a high-level Wraith, to boot; underestimating it could easily get them all wiped out.

It was there that Norn deflated.

"But I can't just stand by and watch more students be harmed..."

Norn couldn't totally oppose taking action while students were getting hurt. And caution aside, many of the students making up the student council *were* the cream of the crop. They were proficient enough to make even Norn consider that they might have a shot. At the same time, she couldn't deny that she had a long way to go compared to people like her brother, which made her waffle on making a decision.

"What should we do?" wondered Norn as she furrowed her brow.

"Come now, you could just... No, wait, you have a point."

Cliff almost asked why she didn't just consult Rudeus, but he stopped himself. He started to realize what Norn was feeling.

Absolutely, Rudeus could solve this problem in a snap if Norn told him about it. He was no master of divine magic, but his skills at offensive magic were Imperial-tier. If anything, Cliff speculated he was on the cusp of Divine-tier. Taking out a Wraith or two would've been nothing for him. But it just wouldn't have been right. To Norn, it was out of the question. She couldn't explain in words why that was, but given Cliff's own dilemma—which he needed to solve himself—he understood.

"All right, let's try this," said Cliff. "If you're all right with it..."

"...?"

"I'll give you my help."

"Huh?" Norn said in surprise. At Cliff's suggestion, she went from inattentive trance to suddenly present. "That's right, you can use Advanced-tier divine magic..."

Cliff had reached Advanced-tier divine magic. Divine magic at Intermediate-tier or above couldn't be taught without permission from the Millis Church, so it wasn't taught at the University of Magic. They didn't even have staff who could teach it.

But Cliff was the pope's grandson. Millis made an exception for him and gave permission for him to learn divine magic. As such, the University of Magic invited a special instructor to give him Advanced-tier lessons. Cliff was just about to graduate, so that instructor had departed. It was on him.

"President, this is a job for the student council! Sir Cliff might be a part of the Circle of Six, but we still shouldn't involve regular students!"

"That's right! We're the ones who should do this! If not, people are gonna say the student council is too incompetent to do anything themselves! They'll say that our president is powerless!"

The two students who had stood in Cliff's way earlier objected loudly to the idea. But Norn's spine straightened. She glared them down.

"Stopping the attacks matters more than our pride!" Norn sternly rebuked. The two students shrunk back. "And besides, what if something happened to you guys? Any of you could be next."

"President..."

"President Norn..."

Norn turned back to Cliff and looked him in the eyes. Her eyes were steely—nothing like the eyes she had when she first visited Cliff or when Rudeus left for the Begaritt Continent. Those had been the eyes of a lost lamb, eyes that trembled in fear and uncertainty. Looking at Cliff now were eyes that had gained determination with each passing year.

She'd visited the church where Cliff worked whenever she needed to talk; all those confessions and complaints must have made a difference.

"Cliff, are you up for this?"

"Yeah."

Cliff had heard Rudeus say with glee that "Norn had really grown up" every now and then, but Cliff hadn't seen it given that he'd only ever heard her complain and do confessions. But now, he felt like he was seeing a glimpse of that girl Rudeus was talking about. It also delighted Cliff to hear Norn ask him for help instead of her brother.

"All right, council," she said, "we'll be infiltrating the underground storehouse! But if it ever turns into more you can handle, retreat immediately! Are we clear?"

“Y-yes!”

And so, Cliff and the student council ventured down into the underground storehouse.

The underground storehouse lay before them.

The University of Magic was a distinguished institution with over two centuries of history since its founding. I couldn't put number on its age, but I'm certain that Cliff or anyone in the student council could produce it if you asked them. Anyway, the University of Magic's building had gone through plenty of extensions and reconstructions since its founding, building it into the mammoth of a school we now knew. The elegance of the building's layout speaks to the characters of the capable administrators and architects who first laid these buildings' foundations. But no matter how much effort first went into the tidy facades of the buildings, waves of repeated renovations combined with the battering of time left some buildings that a generous eye might glide over while admiring the campus's beauty. One of the buildings was this very storehouse.

There were a number of these storehouses arranged on the periphery of the building, and they were all stuffed with the University of Magic's history. Magic wands from two hundred years ago, scrolls from one hundred and fifty years ago, a principal's century-old family toupée—anything that might have any use at all was tossed in here when no immediate use was obvious.

In short, it was a dump.

Once Norn took office as student council president, she decided that it was time to take out the trash. If the junk were cleaned out from the storehouses, the school would have more space. So, she suggested a plan to renovate them into student locker rooms. Garbage cleanup in an unused room; it was the kind of practical albeit inessential little project that suited Norn.

But recently, the student population had grown too large. It became a pressing reality that the school was running out of personal lockers to offer students.

There were teachers who weren't on board. They said that everything in those storehouses was an artifact of history, some of them valuable. You couldn't toss everything indiscriminately. But Norn shut those complaints down by saying, "If they really are valuable, then that's all the more reason why they shouldn't be abandoned in the corner of a storehouse."

In the end, the student council appropriated the necessary funds, hired assistants within the school, and began work on clearing out the storehouse. This project was received relatively positively, and many students eagerly joined so they could earn a little cash.

But as the work continued, a few of those student workers met the Wraith.

"That was how this all began, so we feel some responsibility as the student council," Norn explained to Cliff as she held a lamp in one hand.

"Well, as far as I've heard, the student council shouldn't have any need to feel like they're at fault."

In retrospect, victims popped up once in a while before cleaning had ever started. Even with the barrier reapplied, the attacks kept increasing in frequency. This was proof that the Wraith in the storehouse was growing more powerful. Even if the student council hadn't taken on this project, the Wraith would have broken free from that barrier sooner or later. If anything, the student council helped everyone discover the Wraith even quicker, so there was a silver lining here.

"Ooooh..."

Groaning at Cliff's words was a girl, the same pigtailed one who'd clung to Norn earlier. Both her fists gripped her fifty-centimeter wand as she glared at the pitch-black stairwell leading to the underground storehouse. Her teeth were clenched and her body shook. She was the one who'd found the sealed door in the dark. The one to peel away the seal was, also, her.

The first time she opened that door, a Skeleton had leapt out. Its surprise attack caught and injured one of the other students who'd followed her down. The cleanup job turned into a clash. They barely managed to destroy the first Skeleton, but immediately it resurrected. The rest of the student council rushed to the sound of the commotion.

They'd managed to hold the door back with Beginner-tier barrier magic long enough for a teacher with Saint-tier barrier magic skills to arrive, but that friend of the girl who'd broken the seal was still badly hurt. If they had been a little less lucky, the collateral damage could have been far worse.

She might not have known that a Wraith was behind that seal, but she couldn't deny that she removed it partly on a whim. That would typically be grounds for expulsion. However, Norn had covered for her. She tied the incident to the recent ghost stories and told the lie that they had bumped into the storehouse's door and accidentally disturbed the seal while searching for ghosts.

The fact that the Skeleton continued to resurrect and attack until divine magic pulverized it to dust proved that there was a Wraith controlling it. There really *was* a Wraith there, and it really *was* attacking students, so Norn hadn't fabricated everything. The girl who'd opened the door must have been sick with guilt regardless.

"It sure is creepy," said Cliff as he followed her lead and peered into the darkness. The sealed door was somewhere in there. The Skeleton scare had put a halt to the storehouse cleaning project; the area was declared off-limits by the student council's authority.

Cliff recalled the last time he'd been in this position. It was when he joined Rudeus to search the building that would eventually become his manor. Back then, Cliff was shivering just like the girl who stood beside him now.

"Hey, what was your name, again?" asked Cliff.

"Huh?! M-me?!"

"Yes."

"It's Sheila, okay?"

Sheila glared at Cliff as though to say, *So? What about it?* It reminded Cliff so much of his old self that he couldn't help but laugh.

"Sheila, have you ever done things like... That is, have you ever adventured into a forest or a dungeon before?"

"Uh, no, I haven't! But I'm sure a Demonic Circle of Six member like *you* has soooo much experience! So? Who cares?!"

"Oh no, I have almost none," Cliff said. Sheila eyed him with suspicion. He continued, "It's just that there's something I once heard

from someone who *did* have that experience. He said that when beginners try to take on too much, they end up unable to handle any of it. Focus on doing one thing, and doing it right.”

Was that from the time when he tagged along with Stepped Leader on an adventure? No, it had to be from when he searched that manor with Rudeus a few days later. Cliff recalled that Rudeus gave him a single order: “If we run into an enemy, use basic-level divine magic to attack them.” Cliff kept that order in his head, and when the doll did attack, he was able to fend it off with divine magic. Right. Beginners can’t handle too much.

“Is there anyone in here who’s used to fighting monsters or has worked as an adventurer?” Cliff asked the group.

Of the seven student council members, two hands went up in response. One belonged to the beastman, and the other belonged to a human. Many beastfolk grew up in forests, where they’d fight their share of monsters. The human probably had a history as an adventurer.

“All right, I’ll have you two give the orders. For everyone else, let’s decide on your roles beforehand.”

“Hey, Cliff,” came a gruff voice.

“What is it?”

“I wasn’t gonna push you too hard on it since the President said she owed you a lot, but you ain’t our boss,” the beastman from before said.

Cliff stopped for a few seconds, but he soon realized that anything he said wasn’t going to get through to this guy.

“Fair enough. Then Norn, please take the lead.”

“Huhhh? It doesn’t matter who’s in charge, does it? It’s not like I know much about fighting monsters, anyway...”

“But you’re the president!”

“Well, that’s true. Okay, I’ll talk with Neadle to assign roles.”

Following Cliff’s suggestion, Norn walked over to the student with the raised hand and discussed everything in detail.

“Neadle, you used to be an adventurer, right? I’ll tell you everyone’s strengths, so I hope you can give me advice on who’d be a good fit for what job—”

Cliff looked back at the beastman who'd raised his voice. *Of course.* This was why he'd follow Norn and not Cliff. Norn was in her element assigning the party's roles. She recalled every detail of who was good at what magic and who had useful non-magic skills as she efficiently assigned the roles. If the old Norn were handed a leadership role, she might have panicked and worried about what to do before hanging her head in resignation. But this time was different. She wasn't exactly perfect, and she still seemed plenty panicky, but she was able to work together with those around her to take care of a responsibility, even one thrust on her as suddenly as this one. She didn't naturally know her ass from her ankle, but she was getting it done.

"All right, that should settle it," Norn said. "Are you ready, everyone?"

"Yes!"

With the roles decided, Cliff and the student council members walked deeper into the darkness of the underground storehouse.

The door was stone. The magic circle carved into its surface emanated a pale blue glow—a Saint-tier barrier spell. The University of Magic only had one teacher on staff that could use Saint-tier barrier magic. When any of the barrier spells set throughout the school needed adjustments or maintenance, he was the one who did it.

"The magic circle doesn't look like it's worn off," Cliff said while investigating it. His barrier magic expertise only went up to Intermediate-tier, but studying curses, developing the Zaliff Prosthesis, and manufacturing the Magic Armor had made him quite knowledgeable on magic circles. If nothing else, he could tell at a glance that the magic circle was working properly, and it didn't take much longer to figure out how to temporarily turn it off. If he spent a little more time decoding it, he could probably learn how to use this Saint-tier barrier spell himself.

But of course, Cliff was a man of order. He always followed the rules, even if he was capable of breaking them. If Cliff learned this Saint-tier barrier magic, it could land the teacher who maintained this seal in hot water. He had no intentions of doing so.

After all, he realized, he could study anything he wanted once he returned home to the Holy Country of Millis.

“I can switch it off. We can get in.”

“Understood,” said Norn. “Everyone, are you ready?”

The student council members readied their weapons in response. Some took a deep breath, some had a glimmer in their eyes. There were humans, beastfolk, halflings, and demons. Norn’s student council certainly had a lot more personality to it than the all-human staff that Ariel had during her tenure. It was probably the first time in the school’s history that so many non-humans had been gathered onto a single student council.

“All right. Open it, please.”

At Norn’s request, Cliff made a single incision into the magic circle. And suddenly, the magic circle’s light faded into nothing. The lanterns held by the student council members were now the only lights left illuminating that stone door.

The beastman came up to the door and gripped its handle.

“Ngh... Graaaaagh!”

With a roar from the beastman, the stone door slowly scraped open, screeching every inch of the way.

The doorway only opened wide enough for one or two people to squeeze through at a time. First was Neadle, the former adventurer, who craned and held his lantern in on front of him before sliding a foot inside. The other students followed after. Once they were all inside, the beastman gripped the door once again, and with that same terrible scraping noise, pulled the door partially shut. Not all the way. If the door were fully shut, the student council risked having their exit resealed by a teacher who came to check up on them. As a precaution, they left it left ajar just wide enough for a single person to slip through. The off-limits sign just outside the underground storehouse’s entrance was still up, and they plastered a notice that said “Under student council investigation! Please refrain from reapplying any seals for the time being” on the stone door as well.

If Rudeus were in this situation, he’d just wing it and manage to get himself sealed in. But many of the student council members were the kind of nerds who got locked inside places by pranksters or bullies,

so they'd learned to take precautions.

“...”

The underground storehouse fell silent. They strained to listen, and in the dark, the students heard the faint sound of rattling from closer than they'd like.

There were Skeletons in here with them.

“All right, let's stick to the plan,” said Norn. At her command, the beastman and a halfling boy took their places at the front. Both of them held a steel mace in their hands. Skeletons were all bone, so blunt weapons were more effective than edged ones. All of the student council members were equipped with either magic wands, staves, or maces. The plan was to fend off the Skeletons with strikes and spells while the ranged attackers in the rear aimed for the Wraith that controlled the Skeletons.

“Grr! President, stand back!” shouted the beastman sharply.

The rattling grew louder as the lantern cast its light onto white shapes. A figure made of bones—only bones, no sinew or muscle to hold them together—nevertheless stood upright.

A Skeleton.

It shuffled towards them. This clean-picked corpse caught a look at the student council members, then lifted the stick it held high over its skull. As it did, the rattling grew into a chorus as numerous others like it shuffled into the light.

“No retreat,” Norn declared. “Everyone, prepare to counterattack!”

At Norn's order, the beastman and the halfling swung their maces hard. The Skeleton swung its stick, but its movement was sluggish. A Skeleton's abilities in death are proportional to what they were in life; this skeleton didn't belong to a warrior.

“Hmph!”

The beastman shattered the Skeleton across the ground with a single strike from his mace. However, the bones on the ground rattled as they began to reassemble. The Skeletons would continually resurrect until the student council defeated the Wraith that controlled them.

“Forward!” Norn commanded. Following her orders, the student

council members beat aside the Skeletons as they advanced inwards. Fortunately, none of the Skeletons were particularly dexterous, so they couldn't resist the council's charge.

Onward they moved to the deepest room. There, they found a single altar. Of all the things that could atop an altar, this one had absolutely nothing.

Nothing, that is, except the translucent figure above it.

A figure without any legs.

"WHY... WHY... WHY..." it whispered.

It was the Wraith.

"WHY... WHY... WHY..."

The Wraith's tattered robe fluttered as it slowly turned to face the students. What remained of its gaunt, half-rotted face still showed some signs of youth. Surprise flitted across its face for just a moment, but once it comprehended the shapes of Norn and the other students, it unleashed a hair-raising shriek.

"Kyyyyiiiiiaaaaaaargh!"

"Wh-whoooo!"

"I-it's the Wraith!"

The Wraith's shriek was enough to make a few of the students shrink back, and as they did, the numerous bones strewn around the altar floated up and assembled into more Skeletons. Worse: the Skeletons destroyed earlier, behind them, resurrected into a fresh attack wave. The student council members were flanked between armies of Skeletons in the front and the rear.

All according to plan.

But.

"Ouch!"

One of the students suddenly felt a pain in her ankle. When she looked down, she saw a tiny bone, maybe twenty centimeters long.

It was a rat.

It was a rat's bones.

It was a rat's pearly white bones, and it was scurrying around and biting the students in their ankles.

“Whuh, rah, ah, aaaaaghh!”

In her desperation to get the skeletal rat off of her, the girl screamed and shook her leg, swinging her wand arm as she did. And it wasn't the only Skeleton Rat—dozens more scuttered across the student councils' feet and writhed about their ankles.

“Huh?! Whoa!”

“Eeek!”

Their formation fell apart.

“C-calm down, please!” shouted Norn. “First we'll focus on the... human Skeletons? No, er, maybe we should retreat?”

Norn attempted quell the wave of panic, but with no clear idea of what to prioritize, she found herself overwhelmed. She could only swing her mace at the monsters leaping at her feet. While she struggled, the human Skeletons closed in on the students.

“...”

The rest of the party might have been panicking, but Cliff held it together.

The rats are a problem, Cliff thought, but the Skeletons are slow, and it doesn't look like this Wraith is all that tough...

If this were an A-rank Deadly Wraith, it would have buried the party under a hail of magic as soon as it finished summoning the Skeleton Rats. Or maybe it would have closed in on them to suck out their mana. And yet, it did neither; it just floated above the altar and continued to shriek. Its voice wasn't even that scary. Compared to that boneheaded demon king he'd met on the Demon Continent, this Wraith sounded like a schoolgirl.

Wait. What if this Wraith is actually weak?

That thought hit him like a bolt. If this were the old Cliff, he might break formation, disobey, and put everyone else in danger. This one wouldn't do that on a hunch. Of course, that only applied when it was a hunch *alone*. Cliff realized there was something he could do to turn that hunch into a certainty.

“Eye of Identification!” Cliff shouted as he pulled up his eyepatch. In an instant, his field of vision was filled with words, words, and yet more words. He waded through the headache-inducing wave of

information until finally, he arrived at the information he needed.

He saw it. He saw the line of text displayed upon the Wraith.

“Hm... Ah!”

This was power of the Demon Eye. He’d been granted it from the Great Emperor of the Demon World, Kishirika Kishirisu. Cliff hadn’t slacked on his training, but he was still nowhere near as adept as Rudeus was when Rudeus used his. He’d need many more years of practice to reach that level. But if nothing else, he’d practiced enough to use it in a crisis.

“I’m going in! Someone cover me!” Cliff shouted as he leapt out of the crumbling formation. His target was the Wraith. Standing in his way were two Skeletons.

Cliff made a wide swing with his mace toward the Skeleton on his right, slamming it right into its hips. The Skeleton’s pelvis shattered before it crumpled to the ground.

“—*Exorcise!*”

From the back, someone finished their incantation, and a white light blew past Cliff and crashed into the Skeleton to his left. The single strike of divine magic turned it into dust on contact. He didn’t need to turn around to check. That voice had been Norn’s.

Cliff ran a few more steps, planted his feet, and began his own incantation.

“I call upon thee, God who blesses the land which nurtures us! Deliver divine punishment to those foolish enough—”

Suddenly, a Skeleton jumped out from Cliff’s blind spot into the light. It thrust the sharpened edge of its stick straight toward Cliff. He jerked his body in an attempt to dodge it, but it all happened too quickly, and it struck him in the ribs. The searing pain shot up his spine. Cliff gritted his teeth, pulled himself together, and focused on his enemy.

The Wraith was right there.

“—to defy the natural ways! *Exorcise!*”

A mass of white light shot forth from Cliff’s wand. It flew toward the Wraith with more than enough speed...

Direct hit.

“Gyeeaaaggh!”

The Wraith’s death throes rang out as it disintegrated. Its translucent body tore to pieces, each shred burning like a cinder before snuffing out. A half second’s delay and the Skeletons crumpled to the ground—puppets with their strings cut.

“Huh?”

“Did we...do it?”

Unsure of what had happened, the student council members peered around at the scattered bones. Cliff examined his surroundings for more vengeful spirits before grasping his ribs and collapsing to a knee.

“Guh...”

“Cliff! Are you all right?!”

Norn rushed to him and began the incantation for a healing spell. A faint light washed over Cliff’s wound, and suddenly, it closed.

“Phew,” sighed Cliff in relief as he wiped off the sweat that drenched his hairline.

“Thank you so much,” said Norn. “Honestly, I don’t even know *what...*”

“No, it’s not your fault. Nobody expected those Skeleton Rats. The Wraith being low-rank was what saved us.”

“How could you tell that the Wraith was low-rank?”

“Because I’ve got this,” Cliff said as he tapped the surface of his eyepatch. The one line in the sea of text that he found when he used the Eye of Identification was simple and sweet: *Yep, thassa Wraith. Ain’t too tough neither.*

Still, Cliff made a gamble when he stepped out of formation. The eye might have said the Wraith wasn’t too tough, but a Beginner-tier divine spell could have failed to kill it. If Cliff’s strength hadn’t been enough, or if the eye’s idea of “not too tough” was measured by the standards of the Great Emperor of the Demon World, Cliff could have been killed by the counterattack. Cliff could guess from other cues that it was a low-rank Wraith, but there were no guarantees. A gamble.

“Well, it worked out. We managed to exterminate it,” said Cliff.

“That we did. Thank you very much. Still, it’s strange. From what

we discussed, there should have been a high-rank Wraith here that was strong enough to break through a Saint-tier barrier.”

“Thank goodness there wasn’t. If this was what a typical Wraith put us through, we might not have made it out alive against a high-rank one.”

The student council, previously stunned as they processed the encounter, were rattled sharply awake by those words. But the truth was the truth, so they couldn’t deny it. A swarm of Skeleton Rats was enough to make them fall apart. If the Skeletons had been controlled by a high-rank Wraith, then they would have moved more swiftly, to say nothing of the barrage the Wraith itself would have unleashed. If the situation had been different, the student council could have easily ended up as the newest Skeletons down here.

“But it really is strange. Maybe we should investigate a bit?” said Cliff.

“Good idea... All right, everyone, please look through this area. Keep an eye out for other Skeletons or Wraiths.”

With the Wraith gone, it was time for the investigation to begin.

It turned out the Wraith had been escaping with the help of mice. The students found a wide-open mousehole in the corner that, upon further investigation, led right to the surface. The Wraith must have leaked through it to attack those students.

As to why there was a Wraith here to begin with, a tattered journal found lying in another corner of the room shed some light there. It wasn’t a pretty story. This room was apparently used to store one of the University of Magic’s most prized magic items. But at some point, they moved it somewhere else. With the room now empty, a teacher ordered a few students to clean it. But shortly after they got started, they found themselves locked inside.

From the students’ perspective, it seemed like a malevolent plan by the teacher to lock them away. But maybe the teacher forgot about the cleaning, locked the door, and just...left. The truth of what happened here was lost to time.

The students did try to escape. But these were just first years who'd barely gotten their bearings, or perhaps this grunt work fell to students who'd been held back a year. None of their attempts to escape proved successful. And so, time passed...and so did they.

The weapons the Skeletons held all appeared to be the remains of cleaning utensils, and the number of skulls they found perfectly matched the number of students locked in. That settled it—they were as close to *knowing* what'd happened as they were ever going to get. But the student council felt like speculating, and this is what they came up with: perhaps the teacher returned days after the students had died. This teacher fearfully opened the door and discovered the bodies of those dead students. Fearing responsibility for such a tragedy, they made up some reason to justify sealing it (or at least, get someone else to do it).

The incident was buried, and at some point, the students became undead. Centuries later, mice burrowed deep enough to reach the underground storehouse, which is when the attacks began...

That was what student council guessed, at least.

So many years had passed since this storehouse was last used that it was likely that the teacher responsible for this and relatives of the students involved were long gone. Cliff gave the students' bones a funeral and proper burial. He figured it was the one thing he could do as a Millis priest. The student council members all attended; they at least wanted to offer a prayer. They dug graves for each student and recited scripture for them. They did all of this in pensive silence.

"How will the school handle this incident?" Norn wondered.

"It sounds like they'll go public with it," said Cliff. "It happened centuries ago, and they can't find their relatives anyway, so they figure it won't hurt their reputation much."

"I see... I thought they'd cover it up."

"Head Teacher Jenius really pushed for announcing it."

"Ah, yeah. Mr. Jenius is an honest guy."

Cliff knew Jenius himself. He considered him a decent, understanding man. In fact, ever since Jenius became head teacher, there'd been a huge reduction in racial discrimination against the staff. The fact that he had a strong sense of justice and treated people equally

probably played a part.

“Ah, right. By the way, Norn, may I ask a question?”

“What is it?”

“You may find what I want to ask you rather upsetting...”

“Wow, if *you’re* saying that, it’s gotta be pretty bad... Can you give me a few seconds? I need some mental preparation.”

Norn took a deep breath, lightly smacked her cheeks, and said “all right” to pep herself up. Then, she turned to face Cliff.

“Hit me.”

“Why didn’t you consult Rudeus about this?”

“Huh?” For a moment, Norn looked dumbfounded.

“Well, if you’d asked Rudeus instead of me, I think you could have solved this whole problem without this kind of risk...”

“Oh... Ah, right, that.”

“I take it you did have your reasons, then?”

“I mean, yes, I’m trying to avoid relying on my brother for every little thing. When it comes down to it, I figure if there’s something I can do myself, I should do it.” Norn chuckled at herself over that one. “But you’re right, I should have just asked my brother for this one. I made the wrong call.”

Norn said she’d made the wrong call, but Cliff remembered it differently; Norn was *opposed* to doing this at all. She knew that they couldn’t handle it on their own, so she tried to stop the students from rushing in. If anything, it was Cliff’s sudden intrusion into their business that caused her to make the wrong call.

If I hadn’t shown up, Cliff thought, then there’s a good chance that she would have asked Rudeus for help...

“I apologize for the weird question.”

“Oh, no worries...”

Before the two had realized it, the rest of the student council members had gathered around them.

“Cliff!” called a thick voice. It belonged to that beastman who’d had a problem with Cliff before. The pigtailed girl was next to him, too. The beastman, his intimidating face contorted with emotion, suddenly

and sharply bowed.

“We would have been in serious danger were it not for your assistance! I ask you to please forgive my rudeness from earlier that day!”

“I’m sorry too!” said the pigtailed girl as she bowed her head in turn.

“Oh, it’s no trouble. You weren’t *that* rude, after all.”

“No, I *was* rude! I judged you because you were a part of the Demonic Circle of Six! I can’t apologize enough!”

“Me too, I kinda figured you were gonna be like Linia or Pursena...”

“That...is pretty unfair, yeah,” said Cliff, pinching his temples at the thought of that sneering cat and dog. If that was what he was being compared to, then their caution was warranted.

“Still, I’m glad we solved that problem,” Norn said with a small nod of her head. “Thank you, really.”

“Now nobody’ll have to call the president incompetent!” joked the pigtailed girl.

“I swear, you’re always going on about that!”

“Am I, now? But it’s the truth that her grades aren’t that great, *isn’t it?*”

“Grades have nothing to do with one’s performance on the job. And our president is excellent at hers!”

“Ugh, of *course*, you beastfolk always get like this! Always waggin’ your tail for your *dear* widdle *president* like you’re her pet.”

“*Pet?! Where the hell* do you get off—”

As the two started to fight, the rest of the student council members came over to get a piece of the drama. Each of them inserted themselves into it in their own ways—some egged them on, others played peacemaker.

Norn watched over them with a smile. They were just playing around; they were all friends here. No need to step in. Cliff, suddenly, felt curious about where life would take them. The beastman and the human girl, what would they do after they’d finished school?

“Apologies out of the way: I have something I’d like to ask you two. May I?”

“Huh?”

“What do you plan to do after graduation?” Cliff asked. In response...

“I wanna head back home and work in my village. They’re short on mages!” said the once-antagonistic beastman. Not all beastfolk grew up in the Great Forest; this one hailed from a small farming village in the Northern Territories. He and his family were the only beastfolk in the village, which...to be blunt, meant that they’d faced a lot of prejudice. One of his goals was to prove that prejudice was wrong, and he decided the best way to do it was with his own hard work.

“My family’s actually nobility, but I was thinkin’ of maybe becoming a knight,” said the human girl who’d been butting heads with the beastman just a moment ago. Graduation was a long way in the distance for her, so she hadn’t given much thought to where she’d go afterward. But even if her goals were a little unfocused, she was trying find a profession that would make use of her education from the University of Magic. She didn’t want to live the soft life of a lady and get married off to some other noble; she wanted to be a knight, where she’d have plenty of chances to use her magic.

“I think I’ll go into business. A classmate of mine who graduated last year asked me to join his,” said a demon boy. He’d be graduating next year, so he was working at a trading company in between his studies to learn the ins and outs. Knowledge of magic proved to be surprisingly handy in that line of work, so there were quite a few graduates aiming to become merchants.

“I don’t have a single clue myself. I guess I’ll just go adventuring.”

Of course, there were some students who were far from graduation and thought that way. Many of the older students were groping around for some direction in life—but they *were* looking. But for the most part, the closer that graduation came to each student, the more focused and serious their plans were for life after school.

Hearing about all of their plans gave Cliff a thought.

They’re all different, huh?

“But you all have a lot of respect for Norn, right? Have you

considered working for her after graduation?”

“Well... If President Norn said she wanted me to, then I’d think about it, of course, but she hasn’t told us what she wants...”

All eyes turned toward Norn.

“Huh? You mean me?”

“That’s right, I’d like to hear your future plans as well.”

Norn rested her chin in her hand and took a moment to think.

“It’s still far off, so it’s not like I’ve given it a lot of thought...”

“Just whatever comes to mind.”

“Right. Well, I want to find a job that I’ll be able to handle around the time I graduate. One that suits me.”

“Oh, you’ve got this all figured out, then.” Her plan was honest, practical, and above all, a little...*simple*. Just like Norn. “Don’t you have something you *want* to do?”

“*Want* to do?”

“Well, in your case, you could ask Rudeus and get whatever job you wanted.”

Norn pouted for just a moment, as if Rudeus’s shadow was passing over her and she didn’t like it. Cliff realized his mistake, but before he could apologize, Norn gave her response.

“I’ve learned so much at this school. And I want to learn what coming here has made me capable of. That’s why whatever decision I make, I’ll probably make it just before I graduate. For myself, by myself.”

Those words pierced right into Cliff’s brain. It all came to him. What he was really worried about, what he really wanted to do.

She was right. If he let Rudeus do as he promised, then Cliff would indeed rise through the ranks of the Millis Church. Given that he was also the pope’s grandson, he’d surely be able to reach a fairly high position without breaking a sweat, if not without lifting a finger. And when that time came, Cliff would think to himself:

What was the point of those seven years?

What did I study during those seven years for? What did I work for? What did I have those once-in-a-lifetime experiences for?

Did any of those once-in-a-life-time experiences in those seven years have any meaning?

Yes, I gained a once-in-a-lifetime friend in Rudeus. Wouldn't that mean that not a single thing about me changed during that time?

That was it.

He wanted to know.

He wanted to be sure.

He needed to know what he learned and what he gained were worth those seven years.

“Norn.”

“Huh? Oh, what is it?”

“Thank you. You’ve taught me a valuable lesson here.”



Norn seemed a bit confused by Cliff's sudden gentle laugh, but she soon responded with laughter of her own. She crossed her hands in front of her, straightened her posture, raised her chin, and said, "No, I have you to thank for teaching me so much over the years."

And with that, she gave her a small bow of her head.

Norn had relied on Cliff for help many times when Rudeus wasn't around. It might have seemed like she sat idly by listening to Cliff's words, but Norn was grateful for it.

As her senior and a follower of Millis, Cliff had listened to her grumble, taught her how to be strong, guided her in her studies... Cliff wasn't the only person Norn relied on then, but she still considered him a great influence.

"It's a bit early, but congratulations on your graduation. Thank you for everything. I mean it."

In response to Norn, the student council members bowed their heads and said "Congratulations" together. They might have thought of it as following Norn's lead, but true, clear respect rang through their voices.

"Well, um..."

Cliff was a bit flustered, but he wouldn't shrug it off. Instead, he broke out into a smile.

"Thank you."

That evening, Cliff thought over the afternoon's events while he was in bed. Next to him lay Elinalise, and next to her snoozed Clive. Elinalise's eyes were closed, but she was awake. Cliff could tell because she was continuing to lovingly caress his body.

"Lise," Cliff whispered so as to avoid waking Clive up. Elinalise didn't answer, but she stopped her hand and pressed her forehead against his shoulder. Cliff understood without her needing to say a word.

Cliff turned his head to see her beautiful face right before his eyes. Cliff believed picking a partner based on looks didn't work. But even so,

he thought she was beautiful the moment he laid eyes on her. Despite his ideas about what made a good partner, he'd still wanted her. She wasn't the woman he imagined for himself. No—she was more far beautiful, body and soul and attitude alike.

"I decided on the answer I'll give Rudeus," said Cliff. Elinalise wrapped her fingers around Cliff's hand in response, gently.

"You see, I'm grateful to Rudeus. Thanks to him, I think I've really grown up. Not enough to feel like I can call myself a man, though."

Elinalise said nothing. When Cliff spoke, especially about serious matters like this, she always stayed silent to lend him an ear, just like this.

"I think it's half thanks to him that we've been able to have a child and live this blessed life together. I'm sure he'd say otherwise, of course. He thinks too much of me for some reason. He'd say it was just the result of my hard work."

"That's been the thing, Lise. If Rudeus is ever in trouble, I want to help him. Whenever, however many times I can. My strength might not match what Rudeus has in his pinkie, but I figure there might be something I can do. There must be things he can't do that I can.

"But if I simply do the same things as him, if I put myself under his protection, then I don't think I'll ever develop another skill that he can't already do. If I want to be there for him as his friend, then I think I need to walk on my own two feet, to reach out for what I want with my own two hands, to protect what's mine with the strength in my own arms."

The words tumbling out of Cliff's mouth weren't some grand, well-formed philosophy. They were simply what he felt to be true.

"I want to feel something real."

Something real. Yes, Cliff wanted to feel something for himself.

To feel that he could do it. To feel that he was a real man. To feel how much he'd grown in these seven years. To feel that he could protect Elinalise and Clive on his own. He wanted to test himself in the daunting hierarchy of the Millis Church.

Of course, this was pure vanity. If he put Elinalise and Clive's safety first, then accepting Rudeus's help from the start and gaining Orsted's backing would have guaranteed that. But that wouldn't be the

end of the story. If Cliff made that choice, he'd surely lose his confidence somewhere down the line. When the time came to face a true crisis, he'd freeze up without Rudeus's help. He'd await the direction of an authority who should instead be his friend and peer, and he'd let some crucial moment slip away.

Cliff couldn't put into succinct words why he thought this would happen. All he had was the vague prediction that he'd turn out that way, and he hated the idea of meeting that fate.

"So that's what you think, Cliff?" said Elinalise. She understood.

"Am I wrong?"

"No. But one thing: you already have me within arm's reach. I can be a sword to strike down your foes or a shield to protect you from harm. No point in not using the weapons you have."

"Ah, you're right."

They say that weapons and armor are extensions of your body. Elinalise took that to heart; she wanted Cliff to treat her as though she were a part of his own body. Not in the sense of using her like a tool, but to consider her presence to be as natural as his own arms and legs. This was Elinalise's way of being there for her husband.

"Still, you spent so long thinking about it. What made you decide all of a sudden?"

"Oh, well, there was this thing that happened with the student council members today..."

Cliff talked about the day's events. He explained about Norn's concern, how they exterminated the Wraith under the school, how he asked the student council members about their futures...and last, about how Norn thanked him and curtsied with a smile.

"Hey, sounds like you had a good day."

"Yeah... But there's one thing that's nagging me."

"Oh?."

"Yeah. It's just a thought that I had today..."

"Could I ask you to share it with me?"

"I mean... Okay."

"Don't worry, I won't laugh."

Elinalise's voice was gentle as Cliff fumbled over his words. However, the ends of her mouth were curled in a slight smirk. When Cliff started fumbling over words like this, it was usually because he wanted to say something nice about a woman. He didn't want to sound like he was cheating. Elinalise adored that part of Cliff. He stumbled because he couldn't bear the idea of her ever hating him.

"Well, uh, I'm not sure it's something I'm supposed to say to you, but...I think, maybe, potentially, Norn might *like* me."

"Oh, heavens! Cliff, you aren't cheating on me, are you? You *dog*! You cad!"

"N-no, I'm no—"

"Shh. Cliff."

Up to now, this was how it usually went. Cliff would be in a panic to deny it, and then Elinalise would tease him some more, and in the end, she'd say she was just kidding as they hugged and made up. But tonight, Elinalise decided to be a bit more serious.

"There are a lot of men who would hit on me, but there aren't many who'd even *think* of starting a family with me after learning what kind of woman I am. Frankly, I wouldn't either.

"But you looked through that. You saw this woman you didn't know the first thing about and took her at her word. You tackled the challenge of lifting my curse head-on. Those aren't things that just anyone would do. That's why I fell for you. My heart is yours, Cliff. If I had to step outside of our marriage and sleep with someone else to stay alive, then I'd gladly accept death at the hands of my curse. That's how good of a catch you are. There's nobody I'd rather be with."

"Oh, er...I mean, I don't think I'm *that* great..."

Unsure of how to take such a heavy compliment, Cliff turned beet-red as his eyes swirled in their sockets.

"Now that I've made myself clear, you're free to believe or not believe the words I'm about to tell you."

"S-sure."

Cliff loudly gulped down his own saliva, but Elinalise cut in without giving him a moment's pause, "She's not into you."

"..."

“My curse has made me quite perceptive to every subtle coil of a woman’s heart. So, I’m quite certain.”

These ruthless words left Cliff speechless. But Elinalise soon snickered at her husband and continued in a teasing tone.

“But maybe, and I do mean *maybe*, I’m speaking out of jealousy... Maybe I’m lying to tear you two apart because I don’t want Norn carrying you away...”

“No...I know *that’s* not true. Right. I-I knew that. That’s why I prefaced my thought with a ‘maybe.’ It’s just that, if she really does harbor some feelings for me, then that’d be, you know, a problem...”

“Sure, dear.”

Cliff scrambled for excuses despite his beet-red face. Elinalise looked on with affection. She didn’t quite mean to test his loyalty, but the fact that Cliff would get this flustered proved his loyalty. He was so sweet.

“Wuh... Waaaaaagh... Aaaaaawgh...”

And just then, Clive started crying. Maybe Cliff was being too loud, or maybe Clive was sick of his parents flirting, but he was grumpy.

“Oh dear, seems we got a bit loud.”

“Guh, sorry...”

Elinalise sat up, leaned over the baby bed beside her, and took care of settling Clive. Cliff sat up as well, his hands uselessly pawing the air in the hopes that he could do something to help, but Elinalise had quieted Clive before he found a way to be useful.

“There, there,” said Elinalise as she gently rocked her body to calm the baby down. Cliff watched as an indescribable joy welled up inside him...and an even greater sense of commitment to the path he’d chosen.

Chapter 4:

Cliff and Zanoba's Graduation Ceremony

LIFE SPED PAST, and before I knew it, it was already time for the Ranoa University of Magic graduation ceremony. The ceremony took place in a large lecture hall. Cliff sat among the rows of the newly minted graduates. Zanoba was actually there too, in one of the back rows. I asked if they could let him join the ceremony even though he dropped out, so they decided to make an exception. He was an exceptional student, after all, and he barely took any classes to begin with. Considered in another light, you could say this was Jenius's mercy at work.

Not that Zanoba himself seemed to care about the graduation ceremony. But hey, it means something to participate in these sorts of functions. Life's rituals matter.

The other attendees were the same old people. Seated beside the five hundred graduates were the two or three hundred members of the teaching faculty. Roxy had seemed a bit distant from her colleagues the last time she was in that spot, but this time, she fit right in. Perhaps she'd gotten used to it. Her short stature didn't set her apart from the other faculty; if anything, her uniqueness made it clear how she belonged.

The only non-graduates present were the student council members. Norn headed the group with a scowl that seemed frozen by nerves. Lined up with her were demons, beastfolk, and more. The student council under Ariel's presidency was very human-centered, but I suppose that when the leader changes, the people working under them do too.

I'd thought this during last year's entrance ceremony too, but Norn seemed to be particularly well-liked by the demon and beastfolk students. I'd never heard a bad word from the rest of the students, either. She didn't inspire the same level of fanaticism that Ariel did but being seen as a reliable student council president was plenty good enough. As her brother, she did me proud.

I had gotten Jenius's permission to sit with the student council in

one of their empty seats. Ah, graduation ceremonies! I'm a sap for them.

"Representing the graduating class, Brooklyn von Elsass. I present you with your degree and your D-Rank Magicians' Guild certificate!"

This year's valedictorian wasn't Cliff. I hadn't heard of the dude they picked instead, but his last name did ring a bell. I recalled that it belonged to a royal family in the Duchy of Neris, one of the Magic Nations.

The Ranoa University of Magic might have carried "Ranoa" in its name, but its funding came from all three of the Magic Nations. Putting their nobles and royalty first was probably an unspoken rule.

"I, Brooklyn von Elsass, humbly accept!"

"May you find your way upon the path of magic!"

Cliff looked on with melancholy in his eyes. If it were the old Cliff, he'd probably be throwing a fit over not being the valedictorian. Honestly, if you went by grades alone, none of the other graduates would touch Cliff; his final grades were Advanced-tier in the four branches of attack magic, Advanced-tier healing, Advanced-tier detoxification, Intermediate-tier barriers, Advanced-tier divine. Plus he'd done that research report on curse suppression. He didn't quite reach Saint-tier, but nobody else was even close, maybe not even if you searched back into the school's history. The only person who might be able to compete was Roxy. Maybe.

Me? All I learned in college was healing and detox, so I wasn't in the running.

On top of his excellent grades, Cliff had also become a certified Millis priest. You'd think that spending every morning and night servicing Elinalise would have made him too busy to keep his grades up, but they didn't drop at all. He'd learned everything this school had to offer, and now he was an adult in body and soul. Plus, he nabbed himself a hot wife and they'd popped out a kid, all domestic and stuff.

A real normie-kinda excellence.

So, what about that sad expression? It probably didn't come from grief over how he wasn't valedictorian. It was melancholic, one rooted in deep thought. Maybe he was still considering my proposal from a couple months back. But if he was still thinking it through, that would have been fine by me. There weren't a lot of decisions worth making

that could be thought through in just two months.

With the graduation ceremony now complete, I started by meeting up with Zanoba. He was accompanied by Ginger, who was dressed in formal wear, and Julie, who trotted along behind with a bouquet in hand. Nobody else appeared to be following suit, so maybe it was a Shirone Kingdom custom.

“Congrats on graduating, Zanoba,” I said.

“Oh! Master, thank you ever so much!” Zanoba exclaimed. He was wearing his Ranoa University of Magic uniform. Its design was a bit youth-oriented, but it suited him a lot better than Shirone Kingdom formal wear.

“I see that you put in a good word or two regarding my graduation... I must say, I was astonished when I received that letter from the University.”

“Hey, no big deal, right? Showing up to this stuff helps put it behind you.”

Yeah, it’s always a safe bet to attend ceremonies. Sylphie always seemed a little regretful that she didn’t go to her own graduation ceremony. Then again, Zanoba might’ve seen a ceremony as nothing more than a hassle. He *was* royalty.

“Or was it just a pain?”

“Not at all. I thought it was a bother at first, but surprisingly, it wasn’t all that bad once my turn came...”

Zanoba’s voice trailed off as he looked over his surroundings. Graduates were being surrounded by their underclassmen, greeted by teachers, all that good stuff. The kind of sight you get misty-eyed over once some time has passed.

Well now, was that group over there centered around Norn? A boy—he looked like a demon—was holding her hand with a beet-red face. Seeing that Norn looked a bit uncomfortable while her fellow student council members were grinning ear to ear, I had a feeling it was the classic love confession. Or perhaps it was more wholesome, where an admirer of the student council president just begged to shake her hand.

A Norn meet-n-greet. If I bundled Norn handshake tickets with the Ruijerd figurines, her diehard fan club would probably buy tons of

them. Wait, I wasn't trying to turn a profit, so maybe I shouldn't...

Over in another direction was Roxy, who was surrounded by girls. About five schoolgirls were bowing their heads to Roxy with tears welling in their eyes. Roxy gently smiled and told them something; suddenly, the dams broke, and one of the girls started wailing out of sheer emotion while clinging to her. Roxy seemed uneasy, but she gave the girl some tender pats on the back. The rest of the girls were moved to tears and began bawling as well.

There were plenty of other graduation clichés happening around the campus, all with that sappy, tender atmosphere that you could only find at a graduation.

Not that anyone was coming near me or Zanoba. I knew I wasn't exactly Mr. Popular here, but it still felt kinda lonely.

Well, them's the breaks.

I had a reservation at a pub after this. Me, my family, Linia, and Pursena. Maybe I'd call Nanahoshi over too, that way we could all have a little party. Orsted wouldn't be able to join, but I'd already gotten his congrats. I might have felt all alone in this sort of place, but it wasn't like I didn't have my friends. It was time to put this behind me and head on home. Or so I thought.

"Mr. Rudeus."

A lone man approached me. He had fluffy blond hair and looked to be about twenty. He seemed vaguely familiar... Who was this guy, again?

"A pleasure to meet you. My name is Brooklyn von Elsass."

Ah, the valedictorian guy. I saw him earlier today, didn't I?

"Congratulations on graduating as valedictorian," I said, bowing my head.

"Thank you very much," he replied as he gracefully returned the favor. "But it was only due to the influence of my family that I was able to take that spot. My test scores have always been second to Cliff's."

"Come now, you're too humble..."

I felt myself about to break out in a cold sweat. I didn't wanna say it, but I'd been thinking it.

"Still, regardless of my family's circumstances, I proved victorious

over Cliff in the end. Anticlimactic as it is...”

True, he *was* the valedictorian. Couldn’t argue with results. It probably wasn’t the kind of victory you could boast about, though.

“Which...brings me to you, Mr. Rudeus,” said Brooklyn as he looked right at me. The look in his eyes was resolute. Jeez, why? Maybe this was some romantic confession. He had to defeat Cliff before he could ask me out? Is that what’s up? But oh, but heavens, I belong to another! I have my wife, my other wife, my other other wife, and my children to think about...

“I wish to challenge you to a duel.”

So. I’d been a little wrong.

A duel, huh? Ever since word got out about me being Orsted’s second, I’d been approached by a handful of chumps asking for one, but...what did beating Cliff have to do with dueling me?

“Why?”

“Right. For a while, I’ve become interested in ascertaining just how strong I’ve become. In the past few years, I’ve become aware that my strength is exceptional by the standards of the average person.”

Exceptional? Well, he *was* the valedictorian. Technically. It made sense he was a cut or two above the average mage.

“But you, Mr. Rudeus, have reached far greater heights.”

“I...suppose.”

“I’ve long wished to challenge you. Ever since the moment I saw you defeat the Demon Lord Badigadi.”

Brooklyn clenched his fists tight as he mentioned that moment.

“I come from a family of warriors. When I return to my home country, I’ll succeed the family, hire subordinates, and be in a position of commanding others. Once there, I’ll surely lose all remaining chances to test my strength.”

“Yeah, you can’t act on a whim once you’ve got a position to maintain.”

“Exactly. That’s why I’d like to take this final chance to challenge you!”

Brooklyn bowed his head with force.

I understood perfectly. Every man gets curious about how strong they really are. He knew he was above average. He knew there were people above him. He knew he had a slim chance at victory, but he wanted to challenge me anyway. I understood where he was coming from. Except for one part...

“Where did the ‘defeating Cliff’ part come from?”

“Huh?” Brook seemed to be surprised by that question. “I heard that nobody could challenge you without defeating the Demonic Circle of Six first. Ms. Linia, Ms. Pursena, and Ms. Fitz have already graduated, Mr. Badi has left...and I’ve already defeated Mr. Zanoba...”

“...”

The...Demonic Circle of Six? That was a thing, wasn’t it? Beats me as to who started it, though. Defeating all of them to challenge me? Talk about a stickler for rules...

“So, you won against Zanoba?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve bested him numerous times during mock battles as part of our classes.”

“Uh, you don’t say.”

I glanced over to Zanoba. He looked away.

...Well, in a battle using magic alone, Zanoba probably *would* lose. But this guy couldn’t win against Cliff this whole time, which is what drew this whole thing out until now. He knew he hadn’t *really* bested Cliff, but graduating without challenging me would mean letting his last chance slip away, so he came now to ask anyway.

I get it. A graduation memory, huh?

“I suppose I really must defeat the ones who’ve graduated as well?” he asked.

He probably wanted to make a memory here more than he wanted to win. To put this behind him. Like asking out a crush who’s way out of your league.

“Nah, it’s fine. Let’s do it.”

No matter what the world, people want to make their graduation special.

“I... Thank you very much!”

Brooklyn responded with another aggressive bow.

“Hey, Zanoba, could I ask you to judge?”

“Understood, Master.”

I handed my coat to Zanoba. The thought of using the Magic Armor flashed across my mind...but I figured that was best left on the sidelines.

The whole thing took about four hours.

No need to keep you in suspense: I won. I didn't spend those daily training sessions with Sword King Eris and Dragon God Orsted twiddling my thumbs. Our duel wasn't remotely close; I knocked him *down*. I figured Brooklyn wouldn't want me going easy on him; given the relieved smile he later thanked me with, it seemed like he also knew how this was going to end.

That part was fine.

After that, a number of *other* graduates who'd been watching from the sidelines started coming one after another, each challenging me to test their strength. They claimed they'd beaten Zanoba in an eating contest, or beaten Cliff in a race, or any other excuse I couldn't fact-check. The onlookers gathered in droves, and suddenly, I was the center of a crowd.

I was starting to enjoy myself. Bring it on. Hey, it was graduation, and I wasn't the one who made up that Circle of Six stuff anyway. Even Norn restrained her usual nagging and spent her energy directing the student council members to manage the queue. She resigned herself to the task of preventing chaos without stifling the normal rowdiness of kids at graduation. *Sorry, President.*

“Phew...”

And so, my duels with about twenty other people had ended. All my training might have toughened me up, but even I was a little wiped out. Everyone seemed satisfied; every face had this slight look of contentment on it. I hoped I'd helped make memories for the kids headed back to their homelands.

Eventually, the crowd cleared. Norn had to clean up the assembly hall, so she told me to head home without her before she vanished. The only ones left were Zanoba and his attendants.

“You certainly are popular, Master.”

Zanoba seemed exhausted from all that judging. He was a real glass cannon, no stamina.

“I must say, I’m simply enervated... And you, Master? Are you not a tad tired?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I think we got a bit dirty, though. We ought to get changed before the party later.”

“Hmm... A fair point,” Zanoba said as he looked down at his clothes. They were covered in dirt and sand that the shock waves from those magic spells had splattered him with. Of course, that went double for me, the one those spells were aimed at.

“Then let us return to our homes for now. What of your sister?”

“Norn said she’d join us, and she already told the people at the hall about it, so she should show up on her own.”

“I see. Well then...”

For a moment, Zanoba’s gaze flitted to something behind me, just a little above my ear. I turned around to search for what he was looking at.

Found it.

A head of short, dark-brown hair was looking down at us from the rooftop. Standing next to him was a head of blonde ringlets rustling in the wind.

“Julie, Ginger,” said Zanoba.

“Yes?”

“Apologies, but could I ask you to return home ahead of me and prepare a change of clothes for when I arrive?”

“Understood.”

The two nodded and left. I thought they’d decided Ginger wasn’t a servant anymore, but she was acting pretty subservient to my eye. Guess old habits die hard.

“Now then, Master, let us go.”

“Sure.”

I nodded at Zanoba and we entered the school building.

“I saw it all, Rudeus. You cleaned up.”

Cliff commended me with a tired expression when we arrived on the roof. Elinalise was to his side, standing off a ways. I was aware that she had come to the graduation ceremony; she dropped off Clive at our house beforehand, after all. I wasn’t aware that she’d come in her schoolgirl uniform, what with her dropping out and all. I refrained from asking what she wore that uniform *for*, however.

Hey, today was a graduation ceremony. Whatever floats their boats, so to speak.

“You mean how I showed ’em why they call me the Right Hand of the Dragon God?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You could have easily done that before you ever fought Orsted.”

“Fair enough.”

Cliff rested against the rooftop’s railing.

“So, Cliff, what’re you doing up here?”

“No reason,” said Cliff as he gazed up at the sky. “Just felt like going somewhere high.”

Just felt like it, huh? Hey, we’ve all got times like that. I wasn’t great with heights, so my melancholy usually brought me to Paul’s grave.

“Well, congrats on graduating, Cliff.”

“Thank you.”

I walked up to his side and rested my own body against the railing. Zanoba joined on Cliff’s opposite side. Elinalise stood a bit further away, watching over the three of us.

Man...we were totally nailing that “YA protagonist, ‘gazing out into our futures’” aesthetic. Come to think of it, Cliff had his whole future ahead of him. Twenty-two, married with a kid, and fresh out of university. And with that new chapter in life, new challenges were sure to emerge... Wait, no, I was being silly. Time to get serious. Focus on

what really mattered at a time like this.

We needed to talk about the afterparty.

He'd said he was coming before, and it'd be a bummer if one of the stars of the show flaked out.

"Cliff... What'll you do after this?"

You know, what time would he get there? Would he come with us right to the party, or would he need to go, uh, pregame with Elinalise beforehand? That was what I meant with that question.

"..."

Cliff responded with silence. Was he getting shy? Did he and Elinalise still have some schoolgirl roleplay to get down to?

"I...did some thinking. I talked it over with Elinalise, too."

Cliff paused for a few seconds before his next words.

"One more year. Can you wait for me?"

For a moment, I didn't know how to process what I'd just heard. Our reservation at the pub was today. They'd make us reschedule for sure.

"Until your child grows just a bit older, you mean?" asked Zanoba.

Oh, right. Reality! Cliff had said two months ago that he'd give an answer at the graduation ceremony. Hey, I hadn't *forgotten* or anything. We just had the graduation and the afterparty today, so I didn't wanna press him until after that.

"Yes. Clive is still so little. I'd like to at least watch over him until he's done weaning."

Cliff looked stern as he gazed down upon the Magic City of Sharia. The city stretched out under us. I couldn't tell if it was because of the green roof, but man, my house sure stood out like a sore thumb...

Come to think of it, this rooftop wasn't here when we first enrolled. Three years ago, before the last renovation, they sent out a survey asking what the building needed. I asked for a rooftop, but this was the first time I realized it'd actually been built.

"It will take nearly two years to travel to the Holy Country of Millis from here. However, Rudeus, if I use the teleportation circle in

your home, I could shorten that time. I don't know by how much, but I should have at least a year of leeway."

Cliff seemed to think it was his duty to return home within two years of graduating. Always keeps his word, huh?

"You'll let me use the magic circle, won't you?"

"Of course."

"I appreciate it."

The teleportation circle was taboo. Using it not for an emergency, but for personal convenience was surely something that weighed heavily with buttoned-up Cliff.

"Also, Rudeus. About joining you..."

"Yeah?"

Cliff hesitated to say it. It sounded like I was about to be rejected. I at least wanted to hear his reasoning so I could persuade him one last time...

"I'd like you to wait for that as well."

"Oh, *wait?*"

"Yes. It is true that having the backing of the Dragon God Orsted would allow me to reach a high position within the Millis Church."

That was for sure. Orsted knew a lot about the internal workings of the Millis Church. If nothing else, he'd probably learned about *what* weaknesses of *which* officials mattered *when* during his many long loops.

"But I feel it just wouldn't be right."

"..."

"Part of me wants to know how far within the Millis Church the efforts I've made can take me...but I also don't want to sit in a seat that someone else handed me."

Cliff clenched his fists as he spoke. I guess I understood. He was just like the guys who challenged me to those duels. He wanted to test his strength. It was the part of Cliff that made him a man.

"If those efforts bring me to the top of the Millis Church, then I will become your ally."

Hmm... I certainly would've *liked* it if Cliff could do it on his own, but there was always the chance that he couldn't. If it ended with him

losing his position, then I could live with it. I'd find another avenue to reach the Millis Church while I hired Cliff to be Orsted's personal helmet designer or something. But that wasn't the only way it could go. The thought of his life ending in an assassination made me sick. He could die. But if it was the path Cliff chose, I wouldn't talk him out of it.

"Incidentally, Sir Cliff," said Zanoba in my stead. "Do you plan to travel alone one year from now? What of your family?"

That was right, what did he plan to do about Elinalise and Clive? Cliff looked pained, a mixture of anguish and shame flooding his face. At the same time, he was resolute.

"I'll leave them."

"For...how long?"

"Until I'm a real man. At least."

A real man, huh? Which was to say, he didn't know how long it would be. I looked at Elinalise; her eyes were closed and arms folded in front of her stomach. She had no illusions.

But was this okay? Elinalise surely wanted to be by Cliff's side if she could, to watch over him and give him the support he needed. The curse mattered, too. Cliff's magical implement could lighten the curse's symptoms, but it wouldn't do so for years on end. But it wasn't my place to interject, here. Cliff had made this decision with his wife.

Cliff was at a crossroads, and he'd decided.

"I understand," I said.

Respecting Cliff's wishes came with its risks. If Cliff died somewhere outside of my control, then I'd lose my only connection with the Holy Country of Millis. I'd also lose someone who could research curses. As a risk, though, it could pay dividends. Cliff would get more chances to grow if he struck out for himself. That growth would make Cliff a formidable ally when the time finally came. I couldn't say if it outweighed the risks, but it was certainly possible. As a logical move, it wasn't bad.

Cliff made his decision, and Elinalise agreed. I had to respect that.

"Well then, I'll see you again one year from now."

"Yes. As will I."

Cliff held out his hand. I grabbed it and nodded deeply.

That said, if I had to wait until Cliff became a real man, that was three years of not knowing if Cliff would join up. That meant I had to put Cliff to the side and focus on something else.

As for what... Well, saying hi to Ariel would be a good start. Zanoba just started with the figurine sales, and I had to make sure the Mercenary Band kept recruiting. To accomplish both of those, I wanted to expand into the Asura Kingdom. Perhaps I'd use this year to plan how to conquer Asura. I was gonna be busy.

But first...it was time to party.

"All right, Cliff. Enough of the heavy talk, let's spend the rest of the night havin' the time of our lives!"

"Yeah... Let's do it!"

And that was Zanoba and Cliff's graduation.

Interlude: A Country Bumpkin Visits the City

“**N**INA, a letter.”

It was summer when a letter arrived at Sword King Nina Falion’s doorstep. The Sword Sanctum was always chilled by the year-round snow, but this day was as warm as early spring. The training hall’s master, Sword God Gall Falion, quit before noon; he said, “You gotta be an idiot to train on a day this nice, so you all can do whatever ya feel like for today,” and then marched gallantly to a napping spot.

Nina was a teacher’s pet, so her idea of “whatever ya feel like” was continuing her practice, but she paused when she heard of this letter.

“A letter? I...sol... Ah!”

Nina, drenched in sweat as she accepted the letter from the mail carrier, broke out into a grin. On the other

side of the envelope that bore the emblem of the Water God Style was sketched a familiar name.

Isolde Cluel. The leading swordsman of the Water God Style whom Nina had trained with just a few years before. Nina recalled that she was now in the Asura Kingdom working as a sword fighting instructor while also managing a Water God Style training ground. Their relationship was friendly, but they’d grown distant since Isolde left the Sword Sanctum. Her letter was a pleasant surprise.

“Umm...”

More than just pleasant. Nina giddily tore open the envelope before whipping out the sheet of paper within. However, the sparkles in her eyes dimmed the moment she laid eyes upon the tightly packed bundles of words that the paper contained.

“What’s it say?”

Nina, uh, couldn’t read.

She could piece together an acquaintance’s name, but she hadn’t reached the level of comprehending entire passages. It never really

came up here in the Sword Sanctum.

I'll get someone else to read it, she thought. There were at least some people living in this training hall who'd grown up with proper schooling. *Someone* could read it. Probably.

Nina headed to the backyard. There, a few of the apprentices were taking in the sunshine as they cheerfully chatted away. It was typically Nina's job to scold them when they looked like they were slacking off, so the apprentices hurriedly stood up straight and got their excuses in order. However, today was the rare day where the master told them explicitly to take the day off, so Nina said nothing about their behavior and instead asked if anyone could read her letter. The apprentices traded glances before one raised his hand. Nina handed the letter to the one who claimed that he "could sorta read human language" and asked him to do so.

The contents of the letter were quite simple. It summed up what happened in the past few years, as well as what had been happening lately. Reida's death, the struggles of managing the training ground. Isolde's intense quarrels with Ghislaine as a sword instructor. Nina smiled at that detail—she could imagine the orderly, straitlaced Isolde fuming at one of Ghislaine's wild remarks.

But that smile turned serious when they reached the final message.

"Her Majesty Ariel's coronation will be held soon. The entire month is a grand, nationwide festival. I'd love for you to come visit for the occasion."

The moment Nina heard those words, she resolved to travel to the Asura Kingdom. There was no debate. The Sword God style preached that the first to make a move would be the victor for a reason. The moment she wanted to go was the moment she up and went.

The main street of Ars, capital of the Asura Kingdom, was absolutely flooded with people. So much so that the slightest wobble to either side of you would force you to bump shoulders, so much so that you couldn't see more than a few meters ahead. Denser than a family of

overgrown snow wolves—a packed pack.

The capital of the Asura Kingdom attracted people from around the world as it prepared for the upcoming coronation. Countryside folk who came in the hopes of catching even a glimpse of the ruler of the strongest nation in the world. Nobles dispatched from foreign lands who came to give their blessings in the name of diplomacy. Wandering swordsmen who figured that this would be the perfect time to find some work in the palace. Adventurers who predicted that the guild would be short on hands and came to land some simple, high-paying jobs. Outlaws who were on the run and bet that the best place to hide a tree was in a forest. Merchants who came to hawk shady wares—to make a killing off a huge and festive crowd. Every single race that lived on the Central Continent and some that lived beyond it packed into this nation. And on top of *all* that, the White Knights of the Asura Kingdom were going to be holding a parade today, so even the town's own citizens were hitting the main street to see their beloved knights in their full glory.

“Whuuuhh...”

And in the middle of it all, Nina was turning her this way and that as she attempted to walk toward the center of the city. It was the first time in her life that she'd seen so many people. She had been to towns that she'd *thought* were pretty big, but seeing a crowd of people so massive that it dwarfed her imagination left her dumbstruck.

“Tch, watch where you're going, you little sow!”

“Wha... Oh, you're... Huh?”

By the time she processed that someone was pissed at her, they'd been swallowed up by the sea of people.

This was new to Nina. She *was*, for the record, a Sword King; with her sharpened senses, she could identify the guy who cursed her out and track him if she wanted. But he'd simply cussed her out and kept walking. He probably didn't even bother to look her in the eye. *Maybe that kind of rudeness is like a greeting in the city*, she thought. If this were the Sword Sanctum, she would've sent anyone who talked to her that way right to a healing mage...but perhaps in the capital, being cursed at didn't necessarily mean they were picking a fight.

“Hey there now, pretty lady, would ya like to have a look?”

“P-pretty? Who...me?”

After a few more unsteady steps, Nina found the person calling to her was a merchant. He was hawking something in a small shop nearby.

“Oh, but of course. Never before have I seen someone as beautiful as you... By the by, ma’am, you seem new to the capital, no?”

“Yes! However did you know?”

“Huh? Oh, you’re not a local. Getting flustered by a crowd like this is the truest sign of an out-of-towner.”

Hearing that she’d been bumbling along like a country bumpkin made Nina’s face turn beet-red. She thought she’d play it cool in the big city, but to *real* cityfolk, her idea of a big city was still the sticks.

“It sure is a huge crowd. I guess everyone’s here for the coronation?”

“That’s part of it, of course, but today is also the knights’ parade, so everyone’s gathering on the main street.”

“I see...”

“You saw all the signs, right? They said that anyone who wants to see the parade should go to the main street, while those who don’t should take the back road, Saalten Street...”

“Sorry, but I can’t rea—”

“Ah, I see, I see. Indeed! If you have no need to see the parade, then perhaps you could come by our store? It’s quite easy to enter Saalten Street from its back door.”

“Are you sure? But I can’t pay the to—”

“Oh, I wouldn’t *dream* of charging... Ah, that’s right. If you say you can’t read, then I suggest you purchase one of our products. It’s a picture book bundled with a figurine, but the end of the book teaches you how to read it. Rave reviews! Rave reviews.”

“I can’t really afford a bo—”

“Oh, worry not, absolutely no worries. Our books are far, *far* less expensive than what you’d find elsewhere. A mere two Asuran large coppers... Nay, I feel this must be some sort of fate, so I’ll lower it to a single Asuran large copper and eight small copper coins. What say you?”

Before Nina knew it, she was standing on a road that had cleared out considerably while holding a picture book and a figurine. Her wallet

was now lighter by the exact weight of a single Asuran large copper coin and eight small copper coins.

She'd been bowled over by the salesman's rapid patter. Nina was left with the sense she'd been press-ganged into something by the time she realized what had happened, but it wasn't entirely a negative feeling. The speed of the merchant's strikes reminded her of her training with Sword God Gall Falion.

Still, one large copper coin and eight copper coins. It might have been cheap by the standards of the book market, but it was quite expensive by the standards of Nina's wallet. However, that merchant had shown her the way, so not paying her debt to him would have tarnished her name as Sword King.

This was for the best, Nina thought. And so, she began walking.

Saalten Street was cut two meters deeper into the ground than the main street. It was a bit damp and abutted plenty of tunnels—it felt like a shortcut for townies instead of tourists. The road itself was wide, and just like the merchant said, it was emptier than the main street. This was only relative, however, as the street was still jam-packed with people... But here, the flow of people was neatly split between those headed toward the center of the city and those headed toward the city limits, so Nina could make her way without getting jostled too much.

"I bet I can make it to Isolde's training hall by nightfall now."

The money she'd paid earlier was shaping up to be worth it. With that in mind, she took another look at the doll and picture book in her hands.

The figurine was a demon that held a spear, while the cover of the picture book had the same character drawn on it. Our hero, probably. And, unusually, he was of the Superd race. Nina didn't know what kind of story the book told, but as a warrior, she had always wanted to do battle with a Superd. According to her friend Eris, the Superd were incredibly strong. If Eris, the Mad Dog who radiated a menace that could scare a devil, spoke of the Superd with respect, then Nina was intrigued.

Also, it it'll teach me to read like that merchant said, it wouldn't hurt to give it a study in between practice sessions, she thought while continuing to walk.

Her attention shifted when she heard loud cheers from the main

street. It seemed that the parade was starting. Seeing such excitement made her wonder about this parade; she had meant to visit Isolde first, but it wouldn't hurt to swing by the main street now to watch, would it?

“Huh?”

But then she saw a glimpse out of the corner of her eye of a redheaded woman who looked just a bit familiar.

“Eris?”

Why would she be here? Nina thought as she followed that woman with her eyes. Sure enough, it was her. On the main street, two meters above her, popped out the tip of a red-haired head. Nina could only see from behind, but that posture made her certain. No doubt, it was Eris. Nina didn't know what she was doing here, but she couldn't resist the nostalgia welling in her heart.

“Eri—” Nina attempted to call out, until something made her swallow her words.

“Up you go, Lucie. Can you see?”

“Yup! It's all sparkly!”

That something was the little girl Eris lifted onto her shoulders.

“C'mon, Eris, I wanted to give her a shoulder ride.”

“No way. I know you just want to slobber all over Lucie's thighs, just like you did to me last night!”

“Rude! I wouldn't dream of doing something like that to my own flesh-and-blood daughter!”

“Oh, *sure* you wouldn't!”

“I mean, it's true that I love her enough to *want* to slobber all over them...”

This conversation was with the man standing next to Eris. She'd seen the man before, too. It was back during that awful encounter with the Demon King, Badigadi.

He was the magician who defeated him in a single blow.

He was the man who'd lately been known as “The Right Hand of the Dragon God,” with sightings of him being reported in locations around the world.

Rudeus Greyrat.

“...”

Nina realized she was processing a major shock.

She knew that Eris had gone back to Rudeus, to help him battle against the Dragon God Orsted. And since the letters stopped coming after that, she was certain that the two of them had been killed, but she'd also heard scattered rumors that they had appeared together in the Asura Kingdom. Rudeus became known as the Right Hand of the Dragon God after that, so Nina assumed that Eris had surrendered to the Dragon God as well.

She was sure that Eris had grown strong, far stronger than before.

But the Eris that Nina was looking at now was far removed from the one she'd imagined. This Eris was joking and laughing with a man. And the girl she now had on her shoulders was likely her daughter. It never once occurred to Nina that Eris could have gotten married, much less mothered a child. The Eris she knew—that untamed beast, that Mad Dog—was now doing...*this*. Coming to watch a parade and flirting with a clearly beloved husband...

“I'll...just go see Isolde.”

With that thought, Nina looked away.

Nina had thought that becoming Sword King meant that she was finally on equal footing with Eris, but she was now left to bear this massive sense of defeat.

Nina didn't see it, but this is important: Just out of Nina's sight, obscured by the crowd, Roxy and Sylphie were standing next to Rudeus, with Zanoba and Julie close by.

Afterward, Nina headed to Isolde's training hall. The solemn atmosphere and stench of sweat calmed her nerves. After greeting Isolde, Nina was introduced to the students. Every single one of them, boy and girl alike, carried the honest, humble air that only comes from never getting laid.

Yes, this is how a true practitioner of the blade should be, Nina

assured herself.

After receiving a tour of the training hall, Nina was brought over to Isolde's house. They'd made arrangements for Nina to stay overnight there during her stay in Ars, since the house that Isolde lived in had a spare room. The room was previously occupied by the Water God Reida, but it was fully cleaned out by now.

Nina was unconcerned about Reida, and instead found relief in the fact that Isolde showed zero signs of having a man. She was the Water Emperor, a sword instructor, and a knight; she would've been a real catch. If even *Eris* could be married with children, then the radiant Isolde could have easily scored a partner. It would've been no surprise for Nina to enter Isolde's home and be introduced to her husband and child. She'd prepared for the worst and now she felt a proportional sense of relief.

"Nina, there's actually going to be a small get-together once the parade ends. I'm sure you must be tired from your long trip, but would you mind joining us there? There are many people who'd love to meet the Sword King."

Isolde proposed this idea while Nina was setting down her luggage and catching her breath.

"Sure, fine by me," Nina immediately agreed. She didn't know what this "small get-together" was supposed to be, but it wasn't like she had any plans for the evening, anyway. She could put off her sight-seeing until tomorrow.

Or, so she thought.

Nina began to regret her decision within the hour.

Of course, her train of thought made several stops before it arrived, finally, at regret. It started with, *Something's off*. This was when she saw that Isolde had brought her to a giant mansion near the royal castle. *Huh? This looks pretty big for a "small get-together,"* she thought.

I've been had, went her next thought. This was when she was brought to a fancy-looking room, made to choose a fancy-looking dress, and was half-shoved into it by several maids. *This is definitely some kinda party for nobles,* she thought.

I shouldn't have come, went the thought that brings us to the present. Why had she agreed so instantly? Why had she tagged along so

naively? Why had she allowed them to dress her up without putting up a fight? Nina would normally have fought her way to freedom. So why hadn't she? It must have been that she wasn't her normal self. She was wrapped in an unfamiliar dress, made to wear precarious high-heels that put her off-balance, and even stripped of the sword that had been such a reliable companion to her belt. This was the state Nina was in when Isolde dragged her to the party ballroom and introduced her to person after person.

But she soon realized something that gave her a scrap of relief: not everyone here was a noble. While many of them were, some came from worlds that Nina understood, such as the humble-born knight or the young hotshot mage pulled from another country. And among that crowd were people who, just like Nina, had been tricked into coming and now flopped around, fishes out of water.

People feel at ease when they realize they're not alone. As she relaxed, Nina remembered that she was a Sword King. It was nothing for her to analyze her opponent and measure her odds of victory. Once she confirmed that everyone surrounding her was a weakling, she even started to feel a bit bold.

I'm hungry, thought the newly emboldened Nina. She had an appetite. It occurred to her that she hadn't eaten a thing since noon. All practitioners of the Sword God Style were heavy eaters. Outside of times where her training required her to hole up in the woods or something, she didn't skip meals.

And so of course her eyes were drawn to the smorgasbord of succulent cuisine laid out in the ballroom. And naturally, after attacking every delectable morsel in sight while her fellow partygoers stared, she found herself needing to retreat to the nearest bathroom. And the maid helpfully guiding Nina to the bathroom—Nina struggling to put her dress back on after finishing her business—the maid being long gone by the time Nina finally got it on—Nina finding herself lost in this maze of a mansion with no idea of how to reach the ballroom—all of this was, of course, inevitable.

This is really messing me up, she thought. Nina sighed to herself as she trudged down the dimly lit hallway. She'd been continuously overwhelmed by the atmosphere of every place she'd been to since arriving in the Asura Kingdom, and it kept her off balance, a bit disassociated. Her belief she could take on the world now that she was

Sword King was in shambles.

“I used to do things without needing to *think* so much...”

Maybe it was because she was now a Sword King with disciples. Or maybe it was because she'd run into Eris and her personality rubbed off on her. Unlike the old days, she couldn't act without thinking about the consequences anymore. She believed that this change had made her a better warrior, but...

“Oh, right, I forgot to tell Isolde about Eris.”

Eris was in the city, so Nina wanted to suggest another training session with the three of them. But the moment she considered it, the image of what she saw that afternoon flashed across her mind. She shook her head to put it out of mind.

That isn't the Eris I knew anymore, she thought.

She wanted to forget it, to get back to the ballroom as soon as possible. To give some flimsy excuse and head home. This mansion might have been uncomfortable, but there were plenty of other famous sights to see in the Asura Kingdom. She could have Isolde show her around... No, her friend was sure to be busy, so she'd have to explore on her own. The town had some kind of festival going on, so she could surely find a way to amuse herself. Perhaps she could visit the town's Sword God Style training hall.

Okay, fine... Hm?

Just after steeling her resolve, Nina happened to see a room with light leaking out from it. The door was small, certainly not one that lead to the ballroom. Still, there was likely someone in there who knew the way to it, so Nina figured she could ask for directions. Feeling half-relieved, she approached the door, and...

“...Your Majesty Ariel, surely you don't want that being made public, now do you?”

That was a clear threat. She stopped in her tracks.

Your Majesty... Ariel? She realized. Even a country bumpkin like Nina knew that there was only one person in this country who would be addressed that way.

Ariel Anemoi Asura.

The queen whose meteoric return to royalty, after spending nearly

a decade in the distant Ranoa Kingdom, captivated the hearts of her people. It would be putting it lightly to suggest that the festivities and fanfare throughout the capital of Ars were all dedicated to this single woman.

“Oh? Whatever could you possibly mean?”

“Are you saying you don’t remember?”

Nina treaded lightly as she approached the door. Once there, she peeked into the room through the open crack.

Oh!

Inside was a man and a woman; a blonde woman sitting in a chair, and a light brown-haired man standing to her side. The man had a face that looked familiar to Nina.

“Oh, please. That could be anything...”

“Oh no, in fact—”

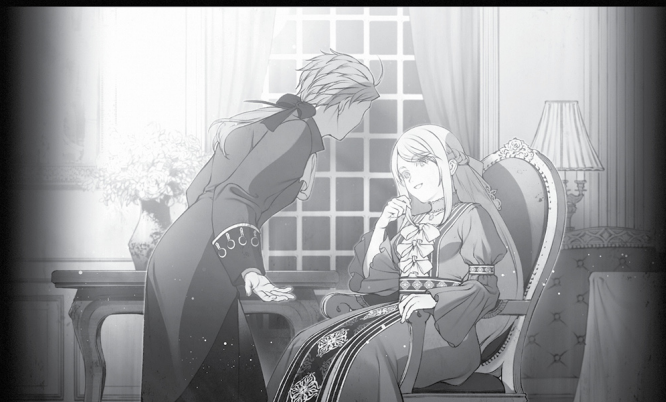
Rudeus Greyrat.

Gone was the man who’d laughed with Eris just that afternoon. He drew his devilish smile closer to Ariel’s cheek.

A thought struck Nina.

He’s pressuring her into carnal relations!

Rudeus Greyrat was a man known for having two other wives in addition to Eris. Nina remembered rumors about him being rather... amorous, as well. Word on the street was that he’d also done a lot of work behind the scenes to help Ariel become ruler. If he really was under Orsted’s command, then he’d likely assisted Ariel as Orsted’s pawn. And now, he was blackmailing her into sleeping with him.



I'll kill him, Nina decided in an instant.

No need to think. She didn't know what secret Ariel was being blackmailed with. She didn't know how strong Rudeus was. Isolde was under Ariel's command. If the boss of a friend was being blackmailed, then there was no reason to stay her blade. She didn't even have her sword, but none of that mattered; Nina would find a way to cut him down.

This would be the point where Nina, if she'd felt like herself, would tell herself to wait a moment...but the last few hours had taxed her past any capacity for self-control.

But before she could act, Nina's senses altered her to an aura of animosity just behind her.

"Gah!"

She reeled around. There, a monster in a blood-red dress stood before her.

"Eris?!"

Nina hadn't thought she'd be here, but Eris was always by Rudeus's side. Since Rudeus was right here, of course she'd come as well.

"Nina?"

Eris's expression slacked for a moment to one of suspicion, but her fury soon returned.

"Wanna tell me who you're aiming all that bloodlust at?"

Crap, Nina thought. There was no stopping Eris when she got like this. If they clashed, then Rudeus would come running from that room. She was risking a two-on-one fight. Eris might not have had a sword, but being pincerred with a mage on the other end was going to be...

"Huh? Back already, Eris?"

By the time that Nina had thought up the worst-case scenario, it had already come to pass. The door behind her opened, and out popped Rudeus's face. Nina instantly understood that victory was off the table, but facing the impossible with the tenacity of a wild beast was the core of Sword God Style. Nina began to concentrate her strength into her core.

"Now then, Sir Rudeus, I believe it's about time we join the party.

We're keeping our guests waiting."

When Ariel appeared next to Rudeus as nonchalant as could be, all of Nina's strength unraveled. Ariel's expression didn't belie a hint of desperation or intimidation. Something was wrong here. Again. That was a feeling she'd grown quite familiar with over the past few hours.

"Were...you're not being blackmailed?" she asked as she folded in on herself.

"Hm?" Ariel looked at Nina's stance and simply tilted her head.

Nina and Ariel had never made one another's acquaintance. But after comparing Nina's posture and expression to Eris's and reflecting a bit on the conversation she'd just had, Ariel pieced together what was going on.

"Oh no, I was the one who made a request to Rudeus, which he refused. I nevertheless wanted his assistance and so presented what I thought would be a weakness of his, but he outmaneuvered me... Could it be that you only listened to the latter half of that exchange, presumed that I was being threatened, and were coming to my rescue?"

Nina nodded weakly with her eyes still widened. Ariel lightly held Nina's arm and helped her up with care.

"Thank you very much. I don't believe we've met. My name is Ariel Anemoi Asura, the incoming ruler of the Asura Kingdom."

"Uh, ah, huh?"

Here was the future leader of a kingdom in all her glory, and she still felt it necessary to exchange introductions. Unable to process this series of events, Nina panicked and turned to Eris. She eyed Nina with suspicion, but she sighed and threw her a bone.

"This here's Nina."

"An acquaintance of yours, Lady Eris?"

"Yeah, she's the Sword Saint Nina Falion. We trained together back in the Sword Sanctum."

Nina realized she needed to head off the next part of the conversation, where Eris would inevitably say she had no idea what her former training partner was doing here.

"I-I'm a Sword King now! The same as you!"

"Oh... You are? Congrats."

Nina fell silent after that faint praise. She looked like she'd just boasted about her title for no reason. All she'd wanted was to give a little context...

"I see, Lady Nina. Rest assured, tonight's party was planned by Rudeus and me. I believe we'll have a chance to talk later, but for now, please relax and enjoy the evening."

"Oh, r-right..."

Ariel smiled warmly and walked down the hall with Rudeus. After seeing them off, Nina let out a massive sigh. This day kept throwing her off.

"So, what're you doing here, anyway?" demanded Eris, who had stayed behind with her.

Nina turned to face her old friend. Her crimson dress and her updo suited her; her choice of necklace, earrings, and other pieces of jewelry were muted and tasteful. The subtle hallmarks of a real lady.

"Um... Eris... Your dress, er, looks nice."

"Heh heh, course it does! Rudeus picked it out himself!"

There was that spark. *Eris hasn't changed that much after all*, Nina thought. It was hard to imagine that this proud woman who now puffed out her chest was the same person as that wild animal from before. But still...

Nina sighed and started unloading on Eris. "You gotta listen to this. So Isolde..."

In the end, Nina never quite figured out what the party was for. When she and Eris returned to the ballroom, they found Rudeus addressing the crowd:

"The Dragon God Orsted is your ally! Act now, and we'll include this as our bonus gift absolutely free! Worry not, there's no fee for signing up. All we ask is that you simply gather your strength in preparation for some war in eighty years and, when the time comes, lend that strength to the Dragon God Orsted. If you make this tiny commitment, the Orsted Corporation will guarantee its support for the

next hundred years! The Dragon God Orsted will save you in your darkest hour, from perils ranging from the prophecies of shady, god-like figures, all the way to the terrors of home invasions. Please, a vote for the Dragon Orsted is a vote for a bright future!”

Nina couldn't quite follow what he was saying, so she simply nodded along.

Rudeus seemed to be gathering allies. Assuming that their earlier encounter really was a misunderstanding, then she wasn't *opposed* to helping out Eris's husband. Nina didn't quite understand what he wanted, though. A war would break out in eighty years, so he wanted them to assist Orsted when that time came...which meant he wanted them to gather strength until then. This was a little elaborate.

Nina wasn't alone; many other guests appeared to be similarly confounded. But in the end, everyone nodded. It probably helped that not a single person in that room would turn down a request from Ariel.

After the party, Nina crashed at the mansion at Eris's suggestion. Isolde joined them. It turned out that the entire place was a gift that Ariel had provided to Rudeus, so they were free to use it as they pleased, or so went Eris's boast.

That night, the three of them reunited for their first conversation together in years. Eris continued to talk about absolutely nothing but Rudeus, and even Isolde was grumbling about how she was starting to want a partner of her own. Seeing those two bounce off each other somehow reminded Nina of the old days; the contents of what they talked about might have changed a little, but the fun she had in their presence hadn't changed a bit. That alone made Nina's trip to the capital of Ars worth it. And by the time that the next day arrived, her silly senses of jealousy and defeat had waned. She felt like her old self.

Nina sampled everything Ars had to offer until the conclusion of the coronation's festivities. The sights, the crowds, the training halls. When she wanted to go somewhere, she went. And she didn't go alone; there were many days where Isolde couldn't join her due to work obligations, but for some reason, Eris stuck with Nina the whole time.

Eris would blabber about Rudeus every time she opened her mouth, so Nina had to wonder why Eris wasn't sticking with her husband instead. But after spending so much time with her, Nina began to understand Eris's thought process: she wanted Nina to seriously accept Rudeus's proposition. Eris wasn't great with words, which made

it hard to follow what her point was, but her earnest, straightforward spirit moved Nina's heart. Rudeus's request went from incomprehensible gibberish so something she now seriously considered.

Nina returned to the Sword Sanctum after the coronation finished. She did some thinking along the way about how she agreed to join Orsted's forces in eighty years. About how happy, bright, and cheerful Eris looked. And how Rudeus stood right next to her.

She thought about them as she spurred on her horse. She didn't commit to it fully. But when she saw the person welcoming her as she pulled in to the Sword Sanctum, something clicked into place.

He was Nina's cousin. A young man who followed in her footsteps to become Sword Saint, and was now on the verge of reaching Sword King, Gino Britz. Nina took one look at him and said the first thing that came to mind. There was no hesitation. The Sword God style preached that the first to make a move would be the victor for a reason.

"Hey, Gino. Wanna get married?"

Shortly afterward, the Sword Sanctum was home to a new married couple, but that is a story for another time.

Interlude: Coming-of-Age Ceremony

LET US SPEAK of my younger sisters.

Norn was working hard as the student council president. For most students these days, she was the only person who came to mind when you mentioned the title. Then again, that might have been because most of the students around for Ariel's era had graduated.

Norn was a popular president. A lot of the students would even call her "Nornie." Norn didn't seem to appreciate that, but hey, it was sweet. Ariel had the reputation of being a reliable president, but Norn had the reputation of being an approachable one. However, (and this might have been her fan club's influence at work) she had zero romantic prospects. She was also treated as something of a mascot for the school—harmless, inoffensive. Sexless.

Of course, she worked hard at her studies as well. I heard that just the other day, she was recognized as Intermediate-tier in Sword God Style during her swordsmanship class. Her progress might have been a little slow compared to the people I knew, but I guess that was what normal people are like. She was also pretty studious about her magic, and she took plenty of other classes on top of it. I didn't know her exact syllabus, but the last time I popped my head into school, I overheard someone say, "Man, I see President Norn everywhere." She was never quite the best at anything, but she applied herself to a broad range of subjects to make up for it.

Aisha was getting pretty stuck on Arus lately. While it was true that Eris's rough mothering skills had been showing up in Arus' behavior, Aisha found baby boys adorable and so she doted on him. It looked like she had a favorite. She'd started a habit of saying, "Oh, Arus is so cute" lately, and I was not super sure what that meant, exactly.

Of course, pampering a baby is fine. There were some parts that worried me, that was all. Like, maybe she was into him a little *too* much... Just recently, when Arus started crying out of hunger, she exposed her own breasts to him and tried to get him to suck on them. Her defense was that she thought he'd stop crying if she gave him

something to suck on, but I don't know...Arus did cheer up and start laughing while sandwiched in her boobs, so I could sort of understand where Aisha was coming from. But I was pretty concerned even so. When I thought about how she had nobody to expose her breasts to besides a toddler, well, you know.

It was minor, in the grand scheme of things.

She was handling the mercenary band well. When I declared that the mercenary band would serve as Orsted Corporation's intel network and that it would span the entire world, she didn't even need to have it explained. She got to work gathering the necessary personnel, property, and negotiations to build branches in other nations. She was also good at keeping a leash on Linia and Pursena. Now, Aisha *herself* wasn't particularly gifted as a manager. I heard that she tended to come down particularly hard on the sort of unskilled employees who repeated the same mistakes time and time again. It was Linia and Pursena who brought out the best in those employees, of course.

Hey, strengths and weaknesses. Aisha was the brains of the operation, and she was darn good at it.

Now! Both Norn and Aisha were approaching their fifteenth birthdays. I don't mean to repeat myself, but this world treated every fifth birthday as a milestone that was met with great celebration. Especially at age fifteen, at which point one was considered an adult; nobles would frequently celebrate this with a *massive* party.

The Coming-of-Age ceremony. To humans of this world, it was perhaps the most important day of their lives. I'm sure this needs no explanation as well, but I planned to celebrate both of their birthdays. And big time: I'd get a fat wad of cash from Orsted, blow it all on the biggest building money could buy, hit up every friend and bigwig I knew, get them to plop down sweetest gifts they could, and give those girls the complete princess treatment.

And with that level of excitement, I brought it up to Roxy.

"I don't know about Aisha, but I think Norn would be happier with something a bit more...practical. Maybe you should rethink it?"

Shot down.

Basically, they weren't royalty, so a party at home would be plenty.

Afterward, Roxy patted my head and said, “You want to go all out with their birthdays because you never celebrated your own fifteenth birthday. Right?”

Nope, didn’t give a damn about my fifteenth birthday...but hey, Roxy was giving me head pats, so who was I to object? I’m a good widdle boy.

Moderation could be good in its way, though. Roxy opened my eyes to that.

“For now, we should talk to the rest of the family to come up with a way to celebrate.”

And so, we planned a secret family meeting with everyone but Norn and Aisha.

We held the conference in the basement under the veil of night. The entire family, excluding Aisha and Norn, gathered around the dim illumination of a lone candle.

“Welcome, my accomplices, to the Assembly of Dark—”

“Um, Rudy, could we get some more light? It’s hard to write like this.”

Our secretary, Roxy, interrupted my dramatic opener to complain. I wished she could have respected the mood.

“I mean, if there’s light leaking out the door, then Aisha might notice us.”

“Why do we need to hide it to begin with?”

“Um... I mean, what else would we do?”

Was this not something to hide? Like, a girl wouldn’t want a boy finding out about what she planned for Valentine’s Day, right?

“It’ll be much harder to prepare if we have to hide the fact that we’re doing it. Unless we have a good reason, I’d much prefer we tell them in advance,” said Lilia.

So, coming clean would make things easier on our end, too. Made sense. It was bound to be less stressful to prepare out in the open rather

than do it in secret.

“Hmm...”

They had a point. We didn't *have* to hide it. Now that I thought about it, my own fifth and tenth birthdays were surprise parties, so I had the preconceived notion that birthdays were meant to be planned in secret. Given what happened last time, Norn and Aisha had probably picked up by now that we were going to celebrate their birthdays. There wasn't any reason not to tell them.

“All right, we'll just tell them we're planning something.”

We might as well go whole hog. That way, there was less to worry about when buying presents. Aisha was friends with everyone in the shopping district, so if they thought I was being suspicious, they could wind up telling her, “Hey, Aisha, dear, that brother of yours came by and bought some cute panties” and blow our cover.

Of course, I wasn't going to buy them *panties*.

That was just an example.

I certainly wasn't thinking about how I'd bought a pair of panties that I wanted to see on Sylphie only to have Aisha poke fun at me with a sly grin.

“But we should at least keep the presents secret,” said Eris, to which everyone nodded.

“I agree, but I also think we should decide on what we're getting them so we don't all get them the same thing,” added Sylphie.

That was an excellent point. Given how popular the two were, they were certain to receive plenty of presents from plenty of people come their birthdays. Norn had the student council and her fan club, while Aisha had the mercenary band and the people from the shopping district.

“So, let's discuss what everyone plans to get them while we're all here.”

With that, the meeting's topic shifted to the contents of our presents. Everyone had already picked something out, for the most part.

Lilia would get a handkerchief for Norn and an apron for Aisha. Sylphie would get a book for Norn and a quill pen for Aisha. Roxy would get a custom-made set of armor for Norn and a (magical)

gardening shovel for Aisha. Eris would get a baldric for Norn and a belt for Aisha.

It looked like everyone put a lot of thought into their gifts. I'd done some thinking of my own. My plan was to give her a figurine of Paul, which I'd begun making just a few days earlier. Norn loved Paul; if there was anyone she wished could have been there to see her grow up, it was Paul. I might get one *hell* of a strange look for this gift...but hey, we'd cross that bridge when we got to it.

But with Aisha, I was a bit lost. I didn't know what she wanted. I did know that she liked cute things. It might have been hard to imagine based on her rough, competent exterior, but she was obsessed with all things girly; she loved frilly clothes, sparkly accessories, and everything in between. Something like that *would* work as a gift...but she'd been earning consulting fees from the mercenary band as of late, so she bought what she wanted, when she wanted it.

"Enlighten me, what gifts made you all happiest when you came of age?" I proposed to the women. Research was important.

"It was quite a long time ago, but I received a hair accessory from my parents. It was their way of telling me to at least *attempt* looking ladylike."

That was Lilia. I didn't know what kind of person she was at fifteen, but I'd heard that she wasn't exactly the type for high fashion. She *did* grow up in a training hall.

"I forgot what day I was born, so I have no...oh, right! Ariel's group gave me plenty of stuff, like clothes, and shoes..."

So, Sylphie's gifts were clothing-related. She typically dressed pretty plain and boyish, so they probably gave all that to her so she could at least dress up in private.

"I don't have much. The Migurd Tribe never had that sort of custom."

Fair enough, Roxy. For the record, I did give her a hat as a wedding gift, so she could have given that as an example...

"Let's see, I had Ruijerd recognize me as a warrior... And Rudeus gave me, umm...the thing!"

Eris did indeed get The Thing. It was a bit too embarrassing to say out loud, but that was the first time Eris and I did The Thing. You

know, swapping uniforms.

Speaking of which, Aisha did seem to be fond of me. Perhaps she'd be overjoyed to receive The Thing. No, on second thought, I could never do That Exact *Thing* to Aisha. But perhaps it could be a nice present as long as it didn't go so far as to end in The Thing. *We'd go to a seaside restaurant and have a toast to your beautiful eyes, delight our tongues with whatever whims the chef prepares, and give you a Cinderella night that comes only once in a lifetime...*

Just that thought made me a bit embarrassed.

"Hmm, I can't decide on what to give Aisha."

"Aisha seems like she'd be happy with anything if it came from you," Sylphie said with a chuckle.

That might be true, but that made the choice all the more important. That was why I wanted to give her something that'd make her *super* happy. Hmm... Maybe I should just shoot for a luxury gift? Like a 100K-carat diamond. Orsted would tell me where to go if I asked. You could've told me to grab it from the belly of a behemoth and I wouldn't have hesitated.

"Why not give her whatever gift made *you* the happiest?"

Roxy's suggestion made it all click for me. She was completely right!

"I see... Then that's what I'll do."

I nodded deeply now that I'd found my answer.

I knew what my present would be.

After a few additional meetings, the preparations were underway. We told Norn and Aisha that we'd throw a birthday party for them and to keep their schedules open for that day.

The two were happy to hear it. I expected Norn to say, "I don't need anything!" or something like that, but instead, she bowed her head and gave a sincere "Thank you very much." It was rare to see Norn act so agreeable...but on second thought, she only ever snubbed me when we were at school. She had a reputation to uphold there, so maybe it

was natural.

I expected Aisha to be more straightforward and start jumping over how excited she was. However, she didn't; instead, her eyes widened in surprise as she murmured, "Oh, right, I'm an adult now." A bit slow on the uptake.

Given how smart she was, maybe something was on her mind. Perhaps I could take her aside during the party to give her some special, adult lessons...Nah, let's not. I wasn't adult enough to call myself one with a straight face. If I started telling her what the world was like, anything I said would come back to bite me.

Anyway, we gave them the heads up so all that remained was to wait for the special day.

The big day had finally arrived. Norn went to school, as usual.

"I'll try to be back as early as I can," she said. Well, she must've been excited.

Aisha left early in the morning to head to the mercenary band's office...but she was home by noon. It sounded like she finished her work early. I thought she would've come back carrying presents from the band members, but she came back empty-handed.

"You didn't get anything?"

"Hmm, I *did* tell them it was my birthday. Maybe it's cause they're beastfolk and don't really know that custom."

That said, she did have plenty of people congratulating her, so she seemed in pretty high spirits. But did the shopping district people not give Aisha anything, either? Well, I guess being a customer didn't make you family... But hey, not every present was something you could put a bow on. What matters is that you want to congratulate someone. It's the thought that counts.

"Hey, Big Brother, can I watch you set up?"

"Yeah, of course."

Aisha sat right down in the dining room and watched absentmindedly as we prepared the party. She watched Lilia and

Sylphie go back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room. She watched Eris and Roxy return from their trip to the market carrying a mountain of groceries. She watched me pitch in with a little bit of everything in between setting up the decorations. She watched it all, without saying a word.

Being hovered over made it a bit harder to work, but she *was* the birthday girl, and I *did* tell her it was okay, so it was kind of hard to tell her to come back in the evening. That, and she really did just watch. Aisha didn't really say anything to interject; she just spaced out while we worked.

Even when Zenith sat down next to her and started to pat her head, she said nothing and continued to watch.

Even when Leo rested his head on Aisha's lap, she didn't pay him much mind and continued to watch.

Even when Arus started crying, she only left her seat for a short while before she returned and continued to watch.

Even when Lucie came by and asked her Big Sister Aisha if they could play together, she just smiled, said that she was a bit busy at the moment, and continued to watch.

She watched, and that was it. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. Maybe she was contemplating everything that came with coming of age. Or maybe she was chuckling at how clumsily we did our jobs. Either way, I couldn't tell.

Eventually, dusk arrived. We completed all of our preparations under Aisha's watchful eye. The dining room was fully decked out. In a corner of the room was a mountain of wrapped presents that we planned to give to the girls. Atop the table was an array of shelf-stable foods; we planned to start making the main dish once Norn returned.

All that was left was to wait for Norn. Was she running late? If she was going to be out for a while longer, it might have been best to pick her up. That's what I was thinking as Norn got home early, just as she'd said she would.

"Hello, I'm home."

Norn's arms were wrapped around a huge, dangerously precarious bundle of presents. Her left hand carried a bouquet. Her right hand

carried a wooden box stuffed with everything from patterned cloths to hair accessories, to mysteriously shaped artifacts whose utilities I couldn't begin to surmise.

“Sorry I'm late. People started giving me all this when I tried to leave... I planned to leave them in my dorm, but I couldn't fit them all into the closet. I thought I'd take these ones back to leave at home, but my bag ripped open on the way here...”

It sounded like a diverse throng of people had burdened her with an equally diverse variety of presents; that was how many people at school wanted to wish Norn a happy birthday. Guess they didn't call her the “approachable” student council president for nothing. I just hoped none of her admirers gave her something creepy, like a cookie with a strand of hair baked in... Let's not think about that.

We welcomed Norn home and got the party started at last.

It was the same kind of birthday party I'd thrown for them a few years ago. I gave the opening speech. Being fifteen didn't mean things would change overnight, but they were now adults in the eyes of society—or so my life advice went. It was the speech I felt unqualified to give but wound up giving anyway. Somehow, I'd gone into know-it-all-mode. My tongue slipped.

With that introduction out of the way, the other adults among us all talked about “conducting yourself like an adult.” Sylphie said that they wouldn't need to ask the family for permission anymore, but they'd need to be responsible. Roxy advised them to never stop learning. Eris told them they should always have a goal. Lilia seemed more emotional than usual; she talked about Paul and Zenith's younger years and the day the two girls were born while nearly sobbing. Zenith patted her head.

Norn's face lit up into a smile when she saw the presents we gave her. She especially liked the armor that Roxy had asked a blacksmith acquaintance to make. Just for this day, Roxy custom-ordered a set of armor that looked just like Paul's old set, which now hung in Zenith's room. It was resized to fit Norn's body and restyled to have a more feminine look. When she equipped Paul's trusty sword to the baldric

that Eris got her, she looked just like a full-fledged swordswoman. Those two might have remembered when Norn once said that she wanted to be an adventurer.

She reacted to the bust of Paul that I made with, at first, outright confusion. I was proud of my work, but it *was* a thirty-centimeter-tall statue made of stone, so I understood where she was coming from. I didn't realize while I was making it, but it was what modern society would likely categorize as a dud gift. But, this world didn't have photographs.

After looking at the bust for a while, tears started welling in Norn's eyes, perhaps from the memories of Paul it brought back. "I'll treasure it," she said as she finally accepted it.

When we all finished giving out our presents, Norn addressed us.

"Um, thank you very much. I'll do my best to be an adult going forward. I hope you'll all support me the way you always have. You're the best."

Her heart was bursting with emotion, but she put it beautifully. Her words made Lilia crumble in tears yet again. Norn, you've really grown up...

It was good to see Norn so happy, but what about Aisha? Aisha seemed happy too, but I felt something was wrong when I looked at her. She didn't wince or show any obvious displeasure, of course. For every gift she got, she'd thank someone by saying, "Wow, amazing! It's so cute! Thank you!" Or she'd express her delight by saying, "It's just what I've always wanted!"

On the surface, Aisha seemed to be enjoying the party as her normal, cheerful self. So what was wrong? I suppose the best way to describe it really was that something felt off. To my eyes, Aisha looked a bit detached; as though her smile and laughs were forced, like it was all an act. Maybe it was how she'd acted that afternoon that made me feel that way.

With my suspicions still high, I gave her my present: a pendant. The Migurd pendant...was in Ruijerd's possession, so this was a replica. It was handmade, too, making it neither expensive nor a genuine article.

"Aisha, this is something that was given to me to commemorate my own path to becoming an adult. It might not mean anything to you,

but I wanted to give this to you as a symbol of your adulthood.”

I was aware that this gift meant more to me than it could to anyone who received it. But for some reason, I wanted to give this to Aisha instead of Norn. I didn’t know why. But when they asked me what gift made me the happiest, this was the first thing that came to mind.

“Oh... Thank you.”

There was no life behind her eyes.

Her expression was blank. Deep in thought, she turned the pendant over and over in her hands.

We enjoyed the rest of the party over servings of the main course and cake. There were still some surprises left. Once the sun had fully set, students started coming by and leaving presents for Norn. It seemed like they’d only found out about Norn’s birthday today and scrambled to buy something while they could.

There were a lot of students like that. And when they saw me answer the door, a lot of them went pale. But no worries! I met them all with a flash of the good ol’ Shining Rudeus Smile. Ah, the smile, truly humanity’s most universal greeting.

...It didn’t go well.

The sight of my smile made their pale faces freeze in even greater terror, with some attempting to run. Sylphie caught them and safely delivered their presents to Norn while smoothing over the scene we’d been making...but really, *how rude!*

So many of them came by that eventually, Norn’s presents stacked up like a mountain. Aisha, on the other hand, didn’t have any presents besides the ones we gave her. She was maintaining her facade, but it seemed a bit strained now, making her look deeply hurt to my eyes.

I doubted that anyone besides myself had noticed that Aisha’s smile was faked. I could have been overthinking it; Aisha might not have minded the presents one bit. But bringing it up with Sylphie felt like a good idea. While I was hemming and hawing over what to do

about Aisha, I noticed the area beyond our front door had gotten rowdy, like a huge gathering of people. Their riotous chatter was broken up by Leo's sudden barking.

"We've got company," said Eris. Her expression turned to stone as she picked up the sword lying in the corner.

Was Orsted coming by? No, there were too many people out there. Orsted wasn't the type to draw a crowd.

I headed to the front door to make sure. When I stepped outside, I saw a mob of miscreants closing in on my home. Their frames were bulky, their fur thick, and their fangs bared. Every one of them was draped in a plain black cloak. They were a fearsome bunch. That said, they looked pretty beaten up; some were injured, while some were wrapped in newly tattered cloaks.

Leading the pack was none other than the town's most diabolical duo. The two shook out their frazzled hair as they argued with each other.

"It was *your* fault, Linia. Screwing up the end of that job yesterday made us start late."

"M-mew?! But *you're* the one who dumped that on me, Pursena!"

"There ya go again, blaming anyone but yourself. Trust me, Linia, it's all your fault."

"Coming from the one who was supposed to track our prey's scent but dragged us to some random barbeque? That's rich, mew! Your screwup was the reason it took so long to take down that hog, mew!"

"Geh! I-it's their fault for camping out there!"

It was Linia and Pursena. As usual, they were at each other's throats. But this time, they were just bantering. The people around them seemed used to it; they kept their hands behind their backs in a parade rest.

"Ah, Boss!"

"Murr? All hands, salute, mew!"

At Linia's somewhat belated command, her followers all bowed their heads in unison. At that moment, I saw what was behind them. There was a gigantic mound atop a wooden board.

"Boss! We're here to celebrate our advisor's coming-of-age, mew!"

“We were out in the forest since yesterday bagging this!”

“This” referred to a gigantic monster. One that resembled a boar and lived in the forests around this area. And what did they mean *since yesterday*?

“Wait... Were none of you guys at the office today?”

“Don’t sweat it, mew. We left the minimum amount of people to keep the lights on, mew.”

“Yep. We scheduled it so that pretty much nobody had to work today.”

Which meant that Aisha must have come home early because the office was almost empty. She went with excitement to celebrate her birthday, but there was nobody to celebrate with. And no work, either. She thought that people would come if she waited, but even by noon, nobody had. Yeah, I couldn’t fault Aisha for getting existential over that.

“Mew! Hey, Advisor!”

“Guys, the advisor’s here!”

I turned around to see Aisha standing behind me. She looked absolutely stupefied by the huge boar the mercenaries thudded onto our doorstep.

“What...is this?”

“Advisor! Happy birthday!”

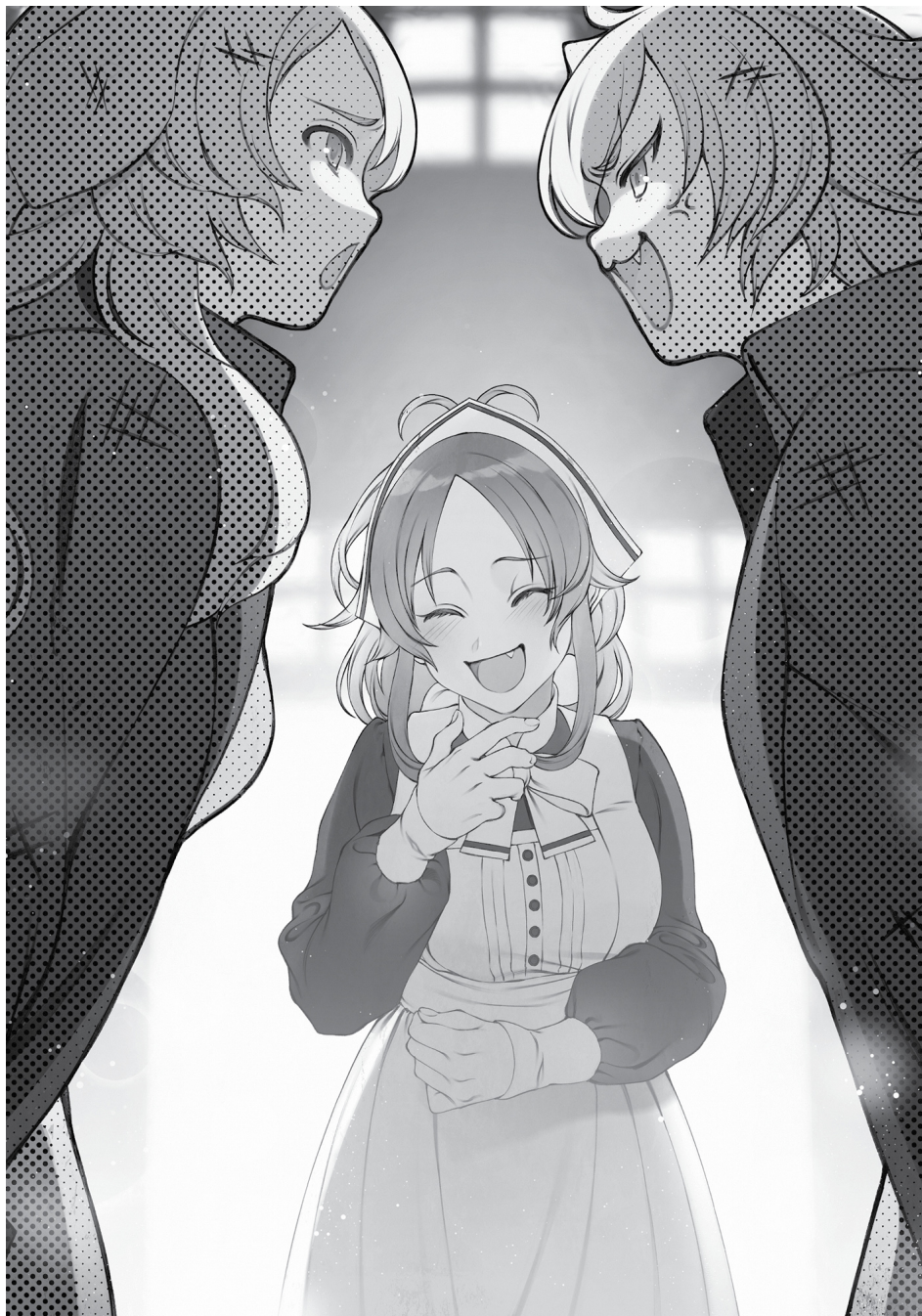
With Pursena’s words as the signal, the mercenary band all bowed their heads once again. *Congratulations, congratulations*, they bellowed, creating echoes loud enough to warrant a neighborhood noise complaint. It was like watching a yakuza ceremony, except the person everyone bowed to was a single little girl.

“Ah... Aha!”

Aisha laughed.

As though this sight had broken her grim mood, she laughed.

“You don’t expect me to eat all that! ...Aha, ahahahaha!”



Saying it aloud made her crack up even harder. The mercenaries were being laughed at, but they took it well because of how happy Aisha was. Every one of them, Aisha included, looked relieved and full of joy. After spending all day having Norn's popularity shoved in her face, Aisha realized that she was equally popular in her own corner of the world.

"Hey, Big Brother, since they're here and all, is it all right if we all eat together on the lawn?"

I took a glance at the mercenaries and saw that some were wagging their tails at the suggestion. I wasn't an expert on beastfolk etiquette, but when any species of hunter brought some quarry to your house, they didn't just hand over their game and walk away. Everyone was supposed to join the party. This went double when those hunters' stomachs growled and their jaws dripped with drool.

"Yeah, of course."

Aisha's smile stretched from ear to ear.

Everyone joined the cookout on the front lawn. Even some students who'd come for Norn found themselves roped in. The boar that the beastfolk brought was roasted whole, and the drinks—brought by an old man who Aisha helped back in the shopping district—flowed freely.

Norn sighed; this rowdy get-together was far removed from the quiet, introspective ceremony which started the night. Note that Norn carefully kept displeasure from showing on her face and refrained from saying anything that would rain on this parade. Probably out of consideration for Aisha, who was having the time of her life.

The cookout continued for a while, but once the mercenary band had gorged themselves, people decided to call it a night. As the crowd thinned out I heard Aisha mutter to herself:

"What even is an adult?"

In contrast to Norn's contentious weighing of her own adulthood, Aisha's small question sounded childish. But hey, that's life. Adults come in different styles; Norn had her style, and Aisha had hers. There

were as many ways to be an adult or a child as there were people. If you were who you were supposed to be and managed to stay true to yourself, then you were doing all right.

“Yeah, what even is an adult, huh?” I answered her. I didn’t feel like I needed to put up a front for Aisha.

And that was how Aisha and Norn turned fifteen years old.

Chapter 5: Growth and New Horizons

IT WAS LIKE I'd blinked and a year had passed. Today was the graduation ceremony. The Ranoa University of Magic's graduation ceremony.

My graduation ceremony.

Today, I dressed myself up in my rarely worn old uniform and joined the procession that I'd always watched from the student council's sidelines. This time, I was one of the graduates. The ceremony for Zanoba and Cliff felt like it was just yesterday.

I listened to the principal's speech while surrounded by classmates I didn't recognize. The speech hadn't changed, though. I'd heard this one a few times. He probably read off the same script every year. Having nobody but graduating students here meant he could cut corners, but I wasn't exactly swept away by it.

The fact that I hadn't been coming to school at all probably made me feel even less connected to the ceremony. I'd barely taken any classes, and by the end of it all, I wasn't even showing up to homeroom. Just a name on the attendance sheet. True, my research into the theory of silent casting and the report I submitted on the methods to train for it had earned me a C-rank membership in the Magicians' Guild, but, well...

Research papers and ranks and stuff are a little dry, yeah? I wasn't gonna get misty-eyed over them.

Ah, well. These times are for nostalgia anyway, and I had plenty of that. My reunion with Sylphie, my friendships with Zanoba and Cliff, the sexual harassment Linia and Pursena heaped on me at every turn, my talks with Nanahoshi about our memories of Japan, time spent sharing drinks and laughs with Badigadi...

Here I was, about to say goodbye to the place where it all happened. That was when the tears started.

Oh. These are those "emotions" I've heard so much about, right? Yeah. Those touching memories are what counts.

Let's take stock.

Over the last year, I finished spreading roots into the Asura area. I stayed in the Asura Kingdom for a few months and set up the Mercenary Band branch, the Zanoba Store branch, and the workshop that would manufacture the store's products.

This was Ariel's influence. She wasn't hard to win over; when I asked her if she would cooperate with Orsted, she gave me the reassuring response of "I was planning to from the start." She even gathered the people of her faction and held a party for my cause. It was presented as an opportunity for them to network with me—or rather, with the member of the Seven Powers, the "Dragon God" whose interests I represented. They were all part of Ariel's faction, so they listened to her. But faction ties only go so far. If you wanna know what got them out of bed in the mornings, they backed Ariel and hoped she'd remember them when it was time to hand out positions. To put it bluntly, most of them were Ariel's yes-men.

However, there were a few people among them who weren't total wastes of skin. One of them was the Water Emperor Isolde. Another was the Sword King Nina, although I still didn't know what twist of fate brought her to that ballroom... At any rate, it was delightful to see the current faces of the Water God Style and the Sword God Style be so receptive to cooperating with Orsted.

When I mentioned this to Eris, she declared that she would handle winning Nina over and dashed off. How that went was a mystery. It looked like the three of them hung out all over town like school pals, but I didn't ask Eris for the results. I didn't have my hopes up, but if this Nina person could gain trust in me by trusting Eris, that'd help quite a bit.

I'd gotten a lot of people to sign up, but I'd been less successful at getting them to understand what they were agreeing to. The stuff about Laplace resurrecting in eighty years zipped through one ear and out the other. But Ariel was an instinctive leader, and they all bounded after her like a pack of leashed dogs. Nothing to worry about there. My work in Asura was now delegated, and I could put it out of mind.

When I informed Ariel that Eris had given birth to a boy, making him my third child, she was quite pleased. And then, she gave me a devilish look, and said:

“That gives me an idea. Why not have one of your children marry a child from the Asura nobility? I believe that would give our partnership a much stronger foundation...”

I got the feeling that she was serious. *You’re joking*, was my oppositional, knee-jerk response. But perhaps popping out a few kids and marrying them to cement alliances with the necessary authorities wasn’t the worst idea? For people a little less fearless than Ariel, familial ties might soften the intimidation of shadowy Orsted and me, his fishy little evangelist.

If one of my kids married a relative of Ariel’s, I’d be relieved to know they’d be well taken care of. I love my children dearly, after all. Not that I was seriously considering an arranged marriage for any of them. I mean, unless one of my daughters were absolutely set on wanting to be a princess or marry a prince. Then sure, we’d talk about it.

Anyway. Marriages and all that aside, no jokes, I held the entire Asura region in the palm of my hand. I had the nobles led by Ariel. I had the school of the Water God Style. With luck, I’d have the residents of the Sword Sanctum soon. Progress on the factory and store for the Ruijerd figurine and picture book bundles was chugging along. By looping in the Mercenary Band (for distribution), I’d be able to spread the Ruijerd figurines throughout the majority of the Central Continent.

It was perfect. If I could make it happen, we’d hear from Ruijerd as soon as possible.

Right now, I was preparing to move on to the King Dragon Realm and use my connections with Death God Randolph to network over there. I wouldn’t have any big players like Ariel on my side, so it was sure to be a challenge. I was looking at a two-to-three-year effort, minimum, though it could very well take more.

The Asura Kingdom was like a tutorial. This was where the real work began.

Let’s go over our research, while we’re at it.

First, Zanoba. Directing the store’s opening and its sales operations kept him busy over the past year, so he’d let his research fall

to the wayside. Perfectly understandable. The last year saw a simultaneous opening of stores in Sharia and Asura. Something had to give with how busy he was. But thanks to the excellent support of Ginger, the manager hired from the Mercenary Band, and the financial brains that Ariel contributed, the shops themselves were running smoothly.

The figurine and picture book bundles weren't exactly flying off the shelves, but they did a reasonable trade. The real hit of the bundle was the reading-and-writing practice worksheet at the end of the book. I was a little irked that something I slipped in as an afterthought was the star product, but I should swallow my pride and accept the victory. Well, whatever—with Ariel as a sponsor, the store was in no danger of closing any time soon. All they had to do was take things slow and steady.

Next up: Cliff. He spent the past year fully dedicating himself to family and his research—the research into lifting the curses on Elinalise and Orsted. No revolutionary breakthroughs there, sadly. It was hitting some major roadblocks.

He succeeded in strengthening the effects of the magical implements, but a complete cure was always just out of reach. Still, thanks to this work, Elinalise would be able to survive over a year without any maintenance. Whether her self-control would be able to do the same was another story.

So, how about we check in on my progress? Fortunately, I get things done.

As I went back and forth between the Asura Kingdom and the Magic City of Sharia, I thought about how to summon the Magic Armor. I even asked Perugia if he knew any methods, and sought advice from Nanahoshi.

In my search, I noticed a law that the magic operated underneath—the bidirectional teleportation circles, I mean. See, the moment that a teleportation occurs, whatever's on top of the circles is *swapped*. An object on teleportation circle A will be sent to circle B, and at the same time, any object on circle B is sent to circle A. The fact that the activation timing occurs when something is placed on top of the circle made this law a bit hard to notice, but after I thought about it, this “equivalent exchange” kinda stuff is standard for the genre.

Anyway, that was a eureka moment, and it sparked the birth of

my new, revolutionary technique: I would take the Magic Armor and place it on a bidirectional teleportation circle in advance. Then I'd carry a scroll containing an unused teleportation circle with me. When the crisis moment arrived, I could unfurl the scroll and activate the teleportation circle. *Bam!* There you go, would ya look at that, ladies and gents! The Magic Armor I'd prepared in advance would hop from its preprepared location and teleport to me right when I needed it.

I hurried to the basement of the office to set up the Magic Armor and test this idea, and it worked beautifully. This made it possible to summon the Magic Armor Version One from anywhere in the world. You know, like the whole "Rise, Gu*dam!" thing.

Couple snags: I would have to carry this huge scroll with me, and the weight of the Magic Armor shredded the scroll to bits after summoning. You'd get one summon per scroll, that was it. No wishing for more wishes.

But, if I had two scrolls that were linked to each other, they could function as emergency escape teleports. This research had a lot of practical applications.

And then there was Orsted. He really came through for me here. He made...not exactly a phone, but a stone tablet for communication. Apparently, it was built with the exact same mechanism as the Technique God's monuments to the Seven Great Powers. The way it worked was that anything written on the main contact tablet would be reflected on the sub tablets. If we both had a main and a sub tablet each, then we could contact each other through text whenever we wanted. But given how heavy they were on *top* of their massive size, walking around with them was going to be a challenge. They consumed a large amount of mana to boot, so this was more of a fixture at a home base than a portable device.

Basically, a phone booth, not a cellphone.

For now, we set up the first pair in both Orsted's office and Ariel's chambers. I could imagine Ariel kneeling before the shining tablets every night and saying something like, "Rest assured, my liege, I will defeat those blasted Rangers."

Anyway, that's pretty much how research has been going. Might as well give an update on the kids while I'm at it.

First, Lucie. My oldest daughter turned five years old. Her

birthday party was held last month, where she got presents from everyone in the family and was very pleased with herself. She was growing up to be a healthy young girl. I could have sworn it was yesterday that she stumbled through her first steps and stuttered through her first words, but now, her feet were firmly on the ground. And while she still stuttered, she'd learned to form words clearly. Her favorite words were "Nuh-uh!" and "Buhhht!"

In addition, she learned how to cast Beginner-tier magic from Sylphie and Roxy's extracurricular lessons. Her days were spent practicing magic in the morning and swinging a stick with Eris in the afternoon. It was like watching my own childhood. The schedule might have seemed natural to Lucie herself, but to an outside observer it looked as vicious as a Spartan military drill. That was why I couldn't help but pamper her when I got the chance, which might explain why she'd started shouting "Papa!" and jumping in excitement at the sight of me.

Super cute.

Her special fifth birthday party seemed to have kindled a new awareness in her about the responsibilities of an older sister. She started looking out for Lara and Arus. She also got it into her head that Lara's faithful companion, Leo, was also a sort of little brother, so she and Lara give him lots of pets. Just the other day, she was brushing his coat of white fur.

It was truly a heartwarming sight...until we later found out that she was using Sylphie's brush to do it. Swiping her mother's brush and coating it in dog hair made Sylphie furious.

"Buhhht, Mama and Leo have white hair!" was Lucie's excuse. I cracked a smile. Kids said the darndest things! But that made Sylphie so mad at me that she froze me out for a whole day. She only forgave me because Lucie found a way to get me good.

"I'll use Papa's brush next time, so don't get mad at him, okay?"

That was her version of sticking up for me. It cost me a brush in the end, but it was a price I was glad to pay. The only brush a real man needs is his fingers.

On to Lara. Our two-year-old future savior was as stone-faced and unshakable as ever. But that certainly didn't mean she was sluggish; now that she was able to trot on her own two feet, she was all over the

place and into everything. She clung to nobody and followed only the whims of her curiosity. She got that from her mom. I didn't do that.

I was anxious to ever take my eyes off of her, but I was probably worrying too much—her guard dog Leo was always there to protect her from getting hurt. If she was on some adventure and needed to plop down asleep right in the middle of it, then Leo would wrap himself around her to keep her safe.

Lara, however, seemed to see Leo as more of a butler. Her preferred form of travel these days was to climb up on Leo's back, grab on, and ride her steed to far off lands. There was even a time when Eris took Leo out for a walk, noticed he had some kind of backpack on, and found Lara had packed herself inside. Leo was supposed to ease our worries, but kids have ways of inventing new ones.

I wasn't sure why, exactly, but Lara had taken a liking to Zenith. She would often sit on Zenith's lap and look up at her face. If you ignored the silence, you might mistake it for a touching scene of a grandchild bonding with her grandmother.

Last was Arus. My eldest son, now one year old, inherited my love of boobs. He loved them big or small. He loved his mother Eris's, of course. But he also loved the board-flat chests on Sylphie and Roxy all the way up to the absolute melons on Linia and Pursena. He had a smile of pure, satisfied bliss on his face whenever he was cradled against a pair of breasts. A connoisseur after my own heart—a lover of breasts of every kind. That said, he had that same blissful smile on his face whenever he peed himself. So hopefully I'm just reading a lot into this. I'm a little worried for your future, buddy.

Incidentally, whenever I tried to hold him, he would burst into tears. Even when he was sound asleep, he'd toss and turn once my arms got around him, and when he opened his eyes, he'd cry as though I was his nightmare come to life. He had a strong aversion to men's chests. It made me feel like crying myself... Well, I couldn't hold it against him when I wasn't there for his birth, but it still made me feel rejected.

Between his love for breasts and his aversion to anyone who didn't have them, I worried he might start getting handsy with women soon. Just grab them without restraint. When he was a little older, I'd need to sit him down and teach him to do better. Totally.

Anyway, that's the kiddo report. If I had to write a headline above this year's summary report, I'd call it a fruitful one. At the bottom of the

report card, I'd end my notes with something like, "Keep up the good work next year."

By the time I'd finished reflecting on my past year, the graduation ceremony was over. I wasn't the valedictorian—no surprises there. They weren't going to hand that title to someone who blew off class *and* the graduation exam. Even if they offered it, I would have refused.

We can skip the post-ceremony duel exhibition. Don't think I need to go into the romantic confession I got from an obvious gold digger, either. I should be able to omit the part where the head teacher, Jenius, told me that he was glad that he recommended me as he went in for a handshake, because we were going to have variations on that conversation for years to come. Norn was still enrolled, and I'd also want Lucie to attend this school in a few years' time. I'd be indebted to him again soon.

Hearing Lucie would be attending before long made Jenius so emotional that he burst into tears.

Night fell. We all gathered at our regular pub. The occasion? Cliff's sendoff party. My graduation party was part of it, but considering I graduated without taking a test or anything, it hardly felt like there was anything to celebrate. I appreciated the sentiment even so.

Cliff would set off for the Holy Country of Millis in one month's time. There, the battle would begin. It would be a personal one, and as such I wasn't quite sure what he was fighting. Half of it was likely himself, but the other half was a mystery. Cliff had been spending the last year preparing to take on... something. He might've faced a setback along the way when he'd been ensnared in Elinalise's boob trap, but with a bit of TLC, those bruises healed into experience and love. Now, he looked like he was heading off to war.

"I promise I'll make it into the upper echelons of the Millis Church. And when I do, I'll proudly return to bring Lise and Clive home!"

Elinalise listened in wonder to this declaration. She was strong. I knew that in my case, if Roxy were to tell me that she was off to travel

to the Demon Continent and become the Demon Lord, I'd be pretty broken up. I'd worry myself sick that my bright Roxy would somehow turn into the infamously idiotic demon lord they already had.

Believing in someone enough to wait for them is easy to say and hard to do; you could send someone off with every hope and good intention in the world and none of it would truly protect them. And it looked like Elinalise knew that as she gazed at Cliff. Her belief wasn't blind; it was brave. If she had misgivings, she wouldn't let them show enough for Cliff to notice.

Times like these reminded me her long years had taught her a few things. It was only when the party started to wind down that she corrected a few of my assumptions.

"Rudeus, could I have a moment?" Elinalise asked me to see her outside.

She was interrupting Harem Heaven. Sylphie was using my right thigh as a pillow to sleep on, Roxy was riding my left thigh while chugging drinks, and Eris was resting her head on my right shoulder. Both my left and my right hands had some something soft to explore, and with the alcohol flowing through me, I had a really devilish idea. I'd started to calculate how I might be able to get all three of them in bed at the same time.

But.

"Oh... Sure."

Seeing Elinalise's face sobered me up a bit. Her expression was solemn. Out of place for a party.

I knew why. I also knew I wasn't going to be of any use to her while drunk. I instantly detoxed myself of my alcohol.

"Whatcha doin', Rudy... You cheatin'? Cheating's bad... Keep the cheating to me... Mmrgh..."

I quieted Roxy's drunken rambling with my lips and set her down, and then...

"Mmph, Rudy, your thighs are so soooft..."

I set Sylphie's head upon Roxy's lap, and finally...

"Rudeus... I want my second one to be a boy..."

I set Eris on Roxy's shoulder... There. Three wives successfully

peeled off of me, and me standing up.

“All right, let’s go.”

I left the pub with Elinalise.

Winter was over, but the snow in Sharia tended to linger for a long time. The cold outside the pub was no different. This chill would stay a while.

“So, Rudeus, it’s about Cliff. I have a favor to ask.”

Elinalise didn’t waste words. I had a feeling it was going to be about Cliff. Elinalise spent the past year worrying, too; how could she not?

“I hate to ask this sort of thing behind Cliff’s back...but I must say that I’m a bit worried.”

Elinalise’s breath fogged from more than just the cold. From her perspective, Cliff was still a child. She loved him as her husband, of course, but some of that love surely bled into a motherly concern, like she might feel for a son or a little brother. If that was how she saw him, of course letting him go on his own would be hard.

“So, can I ask you to go with him?”

“Are you sure?” I asked, surprised. I thought Elinalise respected Cliff’s decision.

“You only have to watch over him at the beginning... It’s important for him to hit his stride, right? I know Cliff can do it, but joining in, especially when everyone already has their little friends, isn’t Cliff’s strongest skill...”

She didn’t have to treat him like a shy toddler. But wait, then again, she wasn’t pulling this out of nowhere—Cliff could be like that. Considering that he never made a single friend besides us during his entire time at the University, yeah, fair point. I could see Cliff making it to the Holy Country of Millis and being all alone in a big country, shunned by his peers, small and still determined to do his very best...

Shoot, I felt tears coming on.

“But remember, I promised I wouldn’t help him.”

I wanted Cliff to succeed. I wanted him to rise through the ranks of the Millis Church as high as he could. That didn’t mean he needed to stand at the very top. I just wanted him to get as far as he wanted. This

was unrelated to gathering allies for Orsted; this was my friend's dream, and I shared it with him.

But the dream was to do it himself, so I couldn't help him. Maybe he didn't say it in so many words, but that was the unspoken meaning when I agreed with him one year ago.

"Isn't there *anything* you could do?"

"..."

"Just the *very* beginning would be fine, really. You wouldn't have to step in, just giving him advice if he gets stuck would be plenty..."

"Hmm."

I wasn't about to give her that "promise between men" stuff. I was worried about Cliff too. He had the ability, but he had his weaknesses, and one of them was bad enough it could set him back immediately. I didn't want to see Cliff fail without ever getting to use his strengths.

In that sense, maybe a little push here or there wouldn't hurt. Cliff wouldn't love it, but hey, you could say that your friends' resources are like an extension of your own. You could also say that a friend who'd help him in his time of need was just another thing Cliff gained from his life at school; in that case, it'd show just how strong he'd become if I were to help him. I wouldn't do to help him *too* much, of course. The key to this endeavor was a light touch.

"..."

All right, she convinced me.

Okay so, what about ally recruitment? I'd been planning to work in the King Dragon Realm while Cliff was in Millis. I had already informed Aisha. Those preparations were already underway. Would changing course for Millis cause any problems...?

It'd probably be difficult to set up the Zanoba Store and sell figurines of a Demon race inside the Holy Country of Millis, where we'd be right at the Millis Church's doorstep. But I *could* set up a Mercenary Band branch while I was there. We could found that local Mercenary Band to gather personnel and intel, then wait for Cliff's success and circle back to get the store off the ground.

"All right, I'll go to Millis too."

"Oh! Thank you so much, Rudeus!"

Elinalise surely wanted to go herself. She wanted to leave Clive in my family's care and help Cliff with his trials in the Holy Country of Millis. But she must have made a promise to raise Clive at home while waiting for Cliff's return.

"Allow me to say one thing, though: whether I help him or not will be my decision to make."

"Of course, that's all I ask."

Elinalise placed a hand on her chest and sighed in relief. She'd really do anything for her husband, huh? I wasn't dissatisfied with my current wives...but damn. Cliff was a lucky man.

Soon enough, the sendoff party drew to a close. It was time to drag my three drunken wives home and tuck them each into their beds.

The children were already fast asleep; it was all thanks to Lilia and Aisha that I could go out and get wasted without worrying about the toddlers back home. Feeling that I owed her a word of appreciation, I returned to the living room to see Aisha. While I was at it, we needed to discuss Elinalise's request. It was a good time to go over the (revised) Mercenary Band expansion plans with Aisha.

With that, I entered the living room to find it blanketed in a tense atmosphere. There was Norn, who had left the sendoff party midway through. Lilia and Aisha, who were watching the house, were also there. All three were standing around, grave looks overshadowing their faces.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Oh, Big Bro..." said Aisha. "Here, look at this."

Before the three of them was a single letter. I picked it up. The sender was marked as "The House of Latria."

I remembered that name. It was my family on Zenith's side. It looked like my own letter finally got a response from all the way in the Holy Country of Millis. I noticed that the envelope had already been opened despite the envelope being addressed to me, but that was fine. I looked inside to find a single-page letter.

"Regarding your correspondence on my daughter, Zenith's, minimally conscious state: I order you to bring Zenith home to the House of Latria at once. If Norn Greyrat and Aisha Greyrat are present, they are to come as well.

—Countess of Latria, Claire Latria”

It was a pretty short message. I mean, sure, it didn’t beat around the bush...but it seemed a little too pointed count as a letter.

This was a decree.

“After all this time, you—”

I stopped myself before finishing that sentence. On second thought, it’d been around five years since I first sent that letter. The Holy Country of Millis was far away from here, with a one-way journey taking well over a year on horseback. The postal service here didn’t exactly work around the clock. Letters could end up sidetracked in who knows what corner of the world before making it to their destination. Messengers could always get attacked by monsters too, so there was always the possibility that letters *didn’t* make it at all. With that in mind, perhaps five years was a reasonably prompt response.

“Hm? Wait, is this the entire letter?” I asked.

“Yes, just that,” Lilia answered. It didn’t seem like there was some second package they were hiding from me.

“I see...”

Pretty brusque short for a letter that was going to take years to reach its recipient. Wait, was that *why* it was short? The House of Latria surely knew the long journey this slip of paper would take. Of course! They wrote multiple letters to make sure one reached us. And if the short, commanding text was to ensure all that effort didn’t end in miscommunication, then it all added up. The forceful tone was just communicating her eagerness for us to come.

Pleased with my deductions, I turned to my sisters who were...not coming to the same conclusions.

“Hahhh...”

“Grandma... She never changes, huh?”

Norn huffed in naked exasperation, while Aisha looked at the letter with hollow, vacant eyes. They looked as though they never wanted to see that name again.

So. Claire was just the type to write like this.

“...”

I glanced over to find that even Lilia looked concerned. Could

Claire really be that bad? I'd never met her, so I didn't know.

"Master, what do you intend to do?" Lilia looked up to ask me.

I was determined. I'd been looking for a good excuse to go to Millis, and then this dropped into my lap. Stroke of fortune.

"I guess we should do what the letter says and take Mom to Millis."

"..."

"..."

My sisters and my stepmom gave each other a look. I guess I picked the wrong answer. Who even was this Claire person? Like yeah, the letter was pretty blunt, but she'd that her daughter lost her memories and was in a semi-conscious state. What parent wouldn't demand to see her daughter knowing she'd gone through that?

I was sure the Latrias had been looking for her, too. Zenith might been a little bit of a prodigal daughter to them, but according to Paul, they invested a lot of money in the Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad, so I owed them for that. And given that they seemed to have some power within the nation of Millis, it was well worth it for me to meet them.

"Well, I figure that we're going to Millis at some point, so we may as well knock out two birds with one stone. Sounds like a perfect stop while we're there for work."

"Huh? Wait, Big Brother, hold on," Aisha hastily interjected. "Weren't we going to the King Dragon Realm next month?"

Of course, that *had been* the plan. I wanted to build up the Mercenary Band in the King Dragon Realm, make connections with Death God Randolph and Queen Benedikte, and obtain the sponsors necessary to maintain the Zanoba Store. And I wanted Aisha to help me do that.

Just like our experience in the Asura Kingdom, I'd need Aisha to come with me to set up the Mercenary Band branch. Aisha and her deft hand with recruitment would be key to getting everything in order. The first month would be to put all the little clockwork parts in place, and the second month would be for Aisha to slowly let it go until it chugged along independently. She had the magic touch for this.

"Given the contents of the letter, I think we should go sooner rather than later. Think of it as prioritizing Millis...and saying hi to

Grandma while we're in the neighborhood."

"Aww..."

Aisha pouted in deep displeasure. She might have become an adult a few months ago, but she wasn't done with this yet.

Suddenly, Norn stood up.

"Brother...I do not want to go," Norn said.

She said it loud and clear. Not "I won't go," not "I can't go," but "I do not want to go." And she didn't pout like Aisha; her expression was stern.

"This is an important time for both my studies and the student council. I can't afford to empty my schedule for several months."

"Well... Yeah, that's fair," I admitted. I might have graduated, but Norn was still in her final year. For one more crucial year, she had to attend her classes, take her tests, and have a real graduation. Unlike me, Norn spent her first six years of school actually *going* to it. Leaving that now would undo everything she'd worked for.

"Uhh, Big Brother. Um... Oh yeah, the rice. We've got a big harvest coming in of that rice you love, so I can't go!"

Aisha sounded like she came up with that on the spot. This was a truly lame excuse—Aisha had already hired people from the Mercenary Band to build those rice paddies on the outskirts and then plant them. I also knew that she'd hired a manager to handle everything and that Aisha herself wasn't going there herself anymore. I knew it all.

I *could* have pointed this out to her and forced her to come along, but Aisha was a fickle worker. Dragging her along would sour her mood, and then she'd be a lump I had to drag around instead of an asset. But I also couldn't do much to set up the Mercenary Band if she didn't come along. I couldn't do what she did...

Oh, wait. Just because she's in Millis doesn't mean she *has* to visit Claire, huh?

"All right, Aisha. If you want to avoid her that badly, I won't force you to see her. But at least come to Millis with me. We'll visit the Latria family just me, Lilia, and my mom, so you can focus on the Mercenary Band."

"Hooray. Thanks, Bro!"

Aisha smiled from ear to ear. Wow. What a reaction. She hated Claire *that* much?

On second thought, *Lilia* of all people was letting Aisha get away with that. Normally, she'd scold that kind of cattiness with a whack to the head.

"Understood, Master. I shall attend with you."

Lilia bowed her head as dispassionately as usual, but I got the feeling that she didn't want to see Claire any more than Aisha did. Considering her position, I couldn't blame her: Zenith was a follower of Millis, meaning that her mother almost certainly was too. I didn't know what the Millis thought of bigamy, but given that its teachings explicitly forbade the practice, I didn't think they were gonna give any wife after number one a warm welcome.

"Thank you in advance, Lilia."

"Oh no, I'm simply doing my job."

Zenith's care was a full-time job. Lilia and Aisha could help; if I didn't have at least one of them come with me, then we'd be in trouble.

"All right, Aisha. With that out of the way, can you get started on switching our destination to the Holy Country of Millis?"

"Okie doke. When're we heading out?"

"Hmm, let's see..."

Why not match Cliff's departure? We didn't have to, but there *was* a bit of distance to cover between the teleportation circle and Millis itself. It wouldn't qualify as "helping" him, so we might as well go together.

"How about a month from now?"

"Gotcha."

Still, my grandmother, huh? I wondered what kind of person she was. I had to admit that Norn's and Aisha's reactions had me a bit scared to find out.

So, change of plans: no going to the King Dragon Realm just yet.

We would now build our next Mercenary Band branch in the Holy Country of Millis.

Aisha grumbled the whole time, but she still made the preparations. She got to work on drawing up and re-filing the paperwork that previously mentioned the King Dragon Realm so that they'd now apply to Millis. From what I could tell, it detailed what sorts of personnel she'd need in each country.

We didn't have a foothold in the nation's government this time, so anything we wanted to do—such as recruiting—was going to be a long process. For now, I set a goalpost for about half a year. Once we'd been there that long, we could assess whether we really had something here, or if it was a lost cause.

I decided to mention it to Cliff, too. By sheer coincidence, I was being called out to Zenith's family home, so how about going together?—Something like that. Cliff smirked, but he didn't seem bothered.

“I had a feeling you'd find a reason to tag along.”

And that was that. It was a really comforting reaction, strangely. I wondered if Cliff had actually been concerned, as though he felt left out by the fact that I demanded to go with Zanoba last time but said nothing when it was Cliff's turn. Like he feared that I considered him to be less of a friend.

C'mon, Cliff, ol' buddy, you know it ain't like that.

All together, we were four people headed to Millis with Cliff: Aisha, Zenith, Lilia, and me. Lilia and Aisha's absence would leave the house extremely shorthanded for skilled caretakers, so Sylphie was staying home. And Roxy said she had some bad memories with the Holy Country of Millis on account of being a demon, so she was staying back as well.

Eris wanted to go, but Lilia was categorically opposed. Madam Eris would be best kept away from the Latria household as it'd surely erupt into conflict, she said. I was skeptical. But from the way Lilia described her, I could tell that this Claire lady of the House of Latria sounded like a pretty difficult person. I could definitely understand why Eris might be the wrong fit for that situation. Getting on the bad side of Zenith's family wasn't my idea of fun, and plus we'd have to take her new infant on the dangerous journey. And so, Eris gave in.

This was the rare journey in which not a single one of my wives

would be joining me... But hey, that's life. And so, our preparations continued, until one day, just before we were ready to depart, a startling realization forced a change of plan.

Sylphie was pregnant.

Chapter 6: Onward, to Millishion...

SYLPHIE WAS ONCE AGAIN pregnant. This would be the second child for her. And it happened just before I was going to set out. Once, this might have made me clutch my head and agonize over what to do. Now? This was my fourth time hearing a baby was on the way just as I was set to embark somewhere. It wasn't *nothing*, but Sylphie and the baby didn't take up all my thoughts.

If anything, I was elated. What should we name the baby? Would they be a boy this time, or a girl? Lucie, you're getting a new baby brother or sister! Are you ready to be the big sis again? Or those were subconversations I rehearsed in my head while half-skipping with elation across the lawn, until...

"Madam Sylphie is... Wh-what shall we do?!"

Lilia was bewildered, her normally placid face now drawn and uncertain.

"I'm the only one who can attend to Madam Zenith... But Madam Sylphie is the only one who can attend to the house, and she's now with child... If the unthinkable happened, then..."

We'd struck a deal that Lilia would come to Millis and attend to Zenith while Sylphie focused on maintaining the household. But now: pregnant. It wasn't the end of the world. Roxy was capable of doing any chore that needed doing, and we could always hire outside help to tide things over. I was tempted to leave it at that, but even I was worried about leaving a pregnant woman alone for months at a time.

Lilia couldn't decide. Should she head out with Zenith, or should she stay to look after Sylphie? It was hard not to be shaken by the sight of Lilia herself *actually* shaken by something. Maybe it would be best to tone down my goofy celebration.

When I decided to serve Orsted, I was fully prepared for the possibility that I'd have to leave a pregnant wife behind for the sake of my work. But now it dawned on me that I'd committed to that sacrifice on the assumption that Lilia and Aisha would be there for my wives when I couldn't be.

This could be bad. Oh boy...

“Umm, I’ll be fine, you know. It’s my second time, and I have Roxy and Eris. I even have Grandma,” said Sylphie to comfort Lilia.

That was true. This was Sylphie’s second baby. She knew better what was coming and had more people to rely on to boot. Roxy spent a lot of time out of the house, but if Elinalise could make regular check-ins, that’d be best. Even Eris would do something if there was an emergency.

Yeah, that was right. During her first pregnancy, we only had Norn and Aisha in the house. And while Aisha was an old hand now, she’d had zero experience back then. From that perspective, we were in a better position now than we were back then. It wasn’t like I was going to be gone for a full year, either. It was gonna be fine.

Eris and Roxy backed Sylphie up.

“Yeah, we’ll make something work! You’ve got me to protect you!”

“I’m away during the afternoons so I’m still a tad worried, but you always have people around you, so I believe you won’t be in much danger!”

Even so, my mind kept churning up fresh, new worries.

Lilia glanced down at little Lara, who tugged at the hem of Roxy’s robe.

“But we have children in the house now, which means more work to do. And you never know what could happen...”

Good point. You never knew what kids could be up to. Lucie and Lara were both rambunctious little squirts. They would never attack Sylphie out of malice. But, let’s say that Lucie accidentally misfired a spell during practice that happened to hit Sylphie. Or maybe Lara started riding on Leo’s back and was about to leave the house, and Sylphie became so panicked to stop them that she fell down the stairs.

...Children were accidents waiting to happen no matter what I did. If I started imagining hypothetical disasters, I’d never stop.

But there were real problems on the horizon. The first big one: when Sylphie told me that she’d probably hit her limit given her race’s biology, I took that as a personal challenge. Didn’t even think about family planning. Of course I’d *never* make babies for the fun of it! How

dare you? I'd always wanted a second child. But maybe the five-year gap since Lucie was born without another baby in sight made me consider that Sylphie really *had* hit her limit, and maybe I did get a little lazy about using protection...

Anyway, the matter was settled. I guess this was at least half my fault—I'd chosen a hectic time to get my wife pregnant, and now I was leaving her alone. A repeat of history. Why *did* I only seem to have children right before running off on long journeys? Perhaps it was the Man-God's curse.

There *was* the option of delaying my departure to the Holy Country of Millis. I could put it off for about a year, see Sylphie's pregnancy to term, and then rethink my strategy once that was over. But then, bam, it'd be Roxy! Boom, Eris! It was possible that there'd be no end to it... But given how long a trip to Millis would normally take, the Latrias probably wouldn't complain if we put the trip off for a year or two. Cliff'd been in the same boat.

Ugh, right. Cliff! Elinalise asked me to at least watch over him until he found his footing. Even if we backed out, Cliff would still go. I was sure he'd be fine, but there niggled a remote possibility he could wash out of the position within that one year and be stuck there.

Be it Sylphie or be it Cliff, my thoughts went straight to the worst-case scenario. If either had been an emergency, my choice would be made for me, but no such luck. I had to choose: Cliff or Sylphie? Work or love? Cold pragmatism said to establish the Mercenary Band in Millis at once and then place Cliff in line for the papacy. That would make things easiest on me. But would that be right? What was the point of all these machinations if I left Sylphie and our child crying in the cold? I had to reconsider why it was that I joined forces with Orsted to begin with. I couldn't lose sight of what mattered.

“...”

Just as I thought that, Zenith moved.

“Hm? Madam?”

With the stiff, jerky movements of a sleepwalker, Zenith grabbed Lilia's hand. Zenith lurched onward, her iron grip yanking Lilia after

her. Lilia stumbled to keep up. Zenith was leading her to Sylphie.

“Umm... Miss, er, Zenith?” asked Sylphie, baffled.

Zenith took Lilia’s hand, and slowly, softly, placed it on Sylphie’s shoulder. As though to say, *Lilia, watch over her*. As though to say, *I’ll be just fine*.

“M-Madam...”

This was a glimpse of that steel will that Zenith hid so well. The entire family had noticed it most reliably came out when something pertained to her children or grandchildren. Of course Zenith would want Lilia to watch over the child in Sylphie’s tummy over her. Everyone understood the decision she’d made.

“Very well,” said Lilia. She wiped her tears, looked Zenith in the eyes, and nodded. Her own resolve had now firmed.

“Aisha!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” shouted Aisha as Lilia’s command snapped her out of her daze.

“You will attend to Madam Zenith’s needs in my place and see her to the Latria residence. No buts!”

“Guh... Got it!”

Aisha froze for a moment. She really didn’t want to set foot onto Latria property. But she wasn’t an going to bust up this touching scene by saying “no.”

“Master Rudeus, I believe we’re decided. Do take care.”

“Yeah... Thank you. For everything.”

If Lilia was looking after her, then I knew tragedy would be impossible. Not with Lilia there. I could do my work in the Holy Country of Millis without any worries.

“Sylphie.”

“What is it, Rudy?”

I had one last thing I needed to say before I left. Something important.

“I love you.”

“Yeah. Same.”

Sylphie stood up and gently wrapped her hands around my torso. I buried my face in her hair and hugged her back, being careful not to squeeze too tight.

“I’ll think up a name while I’m gone.”

“Sure. Tell me when you get back.”

Sylphie broke out into a smile. Any other time, she’d still be anxious. But now, she had Lilia behind her. A second mother to depend on.

I gave my hugs to Roxy and Eris and then set out.

We began our journey. Me, Aisha, Zenith and Cliff. Just us four.

I’d packed carefully, but it was still a lot to carry. The stone contact tablets and the Magic Armor Version One summoning scroll proved pretty bulky. The weight itself wasn’t an issue since I was wearing Version Two. But while I was strong enough to shoulder the burden no sweat, I only had two hands and a single back. Carrying something larger than yourself lowers your dex, too, and this armor wasn’t making me any taller. It was as awkward as carrying an empty cardboard box that your arms couldn’t reach around.

With my massive luggage in hand, we met up with Cliff outside the city. He was surprised by the explanation of why our party was a member short. That said, the baby news made Cliff smile. He offered his best wishes.

“I’m afraid I can’t give your news my highest congratulations given my position...but Saint Millis once said, ‘The birth of a new life, whatever that life may be, is a joyous occasion.’”

“Well, aren’t you supportive.”

“Worry not, I’ll pray to Saint Millis that your future child will get along well with mine.”

No matter how terrible the Millis faith deemed me to be, the sins of the father didn’t fall on the children. There *was* always the chance that any kid with *my* blood in them could end up going through partners one after the other...but I was sure that Cliff would set those

kids right if they did.

Wait, no, that was *my* job. Huh.

“By the way, Cliff, are you familiar with the House of Latria?”

“Latria, oh boy...”

Over the past month, I’d been trying to ask my sisters and Lilia about what kind of person this Claire Latria was. From their descriptions and the peculiarly unpleasant looks on their faces, I was able to figure out this much: she had a stick up her ass.

Norn averted her eyes and said that she “only remembered being scolded and called a slacker.” Aisha sighed and said that “Claire would get mad” and demand she “stopped embarrassing Norn by acting up like this.” Lilia answered that “she deeply values lineage and religion.”

Basically, it sounded like the three of them got nagged incessantly about their family’s structure and marriage history while they were stuck in that house in Millishion. But Claire wasn’t gonna get to me the same way. Sure, everything I’d heard so far made me a bit scared to meet her...but I knew someone else who you could call “stubborn and strict.”

He might have passed away, but...Sauros Boreas Greyrat. Eris’s grandfather. The ideas he valued might have differed from Claire’s, but he was just as much of a stickler for them. We even found some common ground after I showed him proper etiquette. Plus, she was human. If she valued lineage, then hey, I technically had the blood of both the houses of Latria and Greyrat. If she valued religion—well, uh, that part scared me a bit, so perhaps hiding my polygamous marriages would be for the best.

I recalled how I’d weathered that wasteland of shouting and violence that Eris called home. If I imagined Claire as a female version of Sauros, I could handle it. It was also quite possible that time had made my little sisters’ memories of Claire harsher than they really had been, and that Claire was only harsh out of love for her family. Just like Ruijerd. No way I’d stop a mother and child reunion, but I figured that gathering a little advanced intel couldn’t hurt.

“They’re a house of note, particularly as leading figures of the Demon Expulsionists who’ve produced many of the top Temple Knights.”

“I see.”

The Temple Knights. Come to think of it, Aunt Therese was a Temple Knight. I wondered how she was doing.

“I was young when I was last in Millis so I don’t know the details, but I’ve heard from Norn that they’re quite strict,” Cliff added.

Norn placed a lot of trust in Cliff; he listened to her vent about her problems when he was still in school. It seemed that some of those talks were about how she was branded a “good-for-nothing” during her time in the Latria home. About how she was constantly compared to Aisha, about how she was called a “failure who lost to a bastard child.”

Cliff always responded to that by saying, “You mustn’t compare yourself to others. Instead, strive to surpass the person you are now.”

Norn followed that advice until she became the student council president. She never said as much, but Norn obviously held a deep respect for Cliff. It didn’t reach the point of romance. But maybe, if Elinalise weren’t here, Norn and Cliff might have become something more.

Whoa, if that happened, then that’d be a marriage between the Demon Expulsionist Latrias and the Demon Integrationist Grimors... Ah, wait, Norn was different. She was Paul’s daughter, a Greyrat—not a Latria. She didn’t have anything to do with the Millis Church’s political strife.

“Personally, I can only pray that you don’t join the House of Latria and become my enemy.”

“Come on, Cliff, there’s no way I’d ever fight against you.”

“I trust you, of course. But there are times when the choice is already made for us...” Cliff trailed off, and then snickered at himself.

True.

Thinking about these relationship dynamics was already making my head hurt. The Latrias were Temple Knights and Demon Expulsionists, making them Cliff’s enemies. Perhaps I should think carefully before building connections with that house. We Greyrats and Latrias might have been related by blood, but I was first and foremost a Greyrat from the Magic City of Sharia. I didn’t need to be anyone other than Rudeus Greyrat, the Right Arm of the Dragon God, a subordinate to Orsted, and a friend to Cliff.

“Look Cliff, just because I won’t butt in to help you doesn’t mean I’d dream of becoming your enemy. Cross my heart. Giftwrap one of my daughters and hand her to Clive if I’m lying.”

“Ah, that might be a good idea. A marriage between your daughter and my son... Yes, not bad at all.”

“Whoa, what? Let’s not be hasty, you know, it’s not right for parents to decide who their children marry...”

“Yes, yes, I understand. It was a joke, now come along.”

Cliff chuckled and started walking.

That, uh, *was* a joke, right? Then again, Lucie and Lara sure were cute... Those two would definitely grow to be beauties just like their mothers. Clive would grow up seeing those beautiful sisters every day. His first love would probably be Lucie. And since he was Elinalise’s son, he might be precocious and ask her out early.

I didn’t love the idea of some random kid off the street calling on my daughters, but this was Cliff’s son. If Clive begged on his hands and knees before me, his future father-in-law, then I could perhaps be convinced to permit their relationship. *But hold on there, kiddo, you’ve got some nerve calling me your in-law already—*

“Big Brother, we’re leaving you behind!” called Aisha as she held Zenith’s hand. That snapped me back to reality.

“Ah, sorry about that!”

Ah, well, that was still a long way off. I turned my attention to the present and ran to catch up.

We entered the office and greeted Orsted. After that, we descended underground to the teleportation circle. In the blink of an eye, we were on the Millis Continent.

Last time I was here, I’d made the Millis teleportation circle where we found ourselves standing. It was in the basement of an abandoned mansion deep in a forest, not far from the Millis capital. Why was there an abandoned mansion in the middle of the forest, you ask? In this world, villages built near forests are sometimes invaded by the forest—suddenly swallowed whole. That was the story behind these ruins.

The dim glow of the magic circle threw an eerie light onto the

moss and ivy that climbed up the basement's walls. We didn't maintain the mansion, but the surrounding trees buttressed the walls. It wouldn't fall down any time soon. Some adventurers from nearby towns came by every now and then, I heard, but the room with the magic circle was only accessible through a hidden pathway. We just placed a loot chest in the room connecting to it. All it contained were a few random magic items, but they should've been enough to convince the average person snooping around that they'd found everything.

From the mansion, we traveled on foot. It took a bit of time given Zenith's dissociated state. There weren't going to be any strong monsters in our way since we were close to Millis, but we still needed to move with caution.

Ah yes! Speaking of monsters, that reminded me of the time I came to this forest with Orsted to set up that magic circle. It was my first time finally encountering one of the most famous varieties of monsters out there: the goblin. Those green-skinned fellas who were about half the height of humans. They were aggressive, amorous, and among the weakest class of creatures on the planet. They lived in packs, and sometimes they'd capture women of other species so they could mate with and impregnate them. They couldn't be reasoned with and they viewed people as enemies, so they'd attack on sight. Goblins made me wonder if they actually weren't monsters, but instead demons. They lived incredibly primitive lifestyles inside caves within the forest. They resided in cliffside dwellings and eked out a living by grouping together to hunt. Their engineering skills weren't great, but they used tools like clubs and stone knives. Also, while I only saw it in glimpses, I had seen a goblin parent show what might be mistaken for affection towards their own children.

In my mind, there wasn't much daylight between them and primitive humans; they were treated like monsters simply because of their low intelligence. Perhaps things might go another way if we could understand each other. Sadly, this was the Millis Continent, and the Holy Country of Millis would never acknowledge we were more alike than different. Perhaps the goblin compulsion to attack people on sight was simply a holdover from the past. The goblins and the Holy Country of Millis must have had a history of warfare that I wasn't aware of.

The more I thought about it, the more I saw the goblins as tragic creatures. If only they had resided in the Central Continent, where they might have been recognized as low-level demons instead of complete

monsters...

That's what was going through my mind right after I killed a goblin who attacked us on our path.

"Big Brother, why are you tearing up over a *goblin*?"

"You know, just thinking that if goblins had lived somewhere else, they might have been called demons instead of monsters."

"Uh... You sure Roxy wouldn't get mad at you for that?"

"Nah, she wouldn't."

The word "demon" was actually an umbrella term that included a lot of different races. I was far from aware of every single one, but I was sure that there had to be some demon races out there with intellects as lacking as goblins. Heck, there was someone people called a demon king who was pretty dumb; it wouldn't be a surprise for a race to be even dumber than *that*. If anything, that demon king's level of stupidity was the bigger marvel of nature.

"So, what made you think of that, anyway?"

"Well, unlike other monsters, goblins form groups, right? So I was wondering what would happen if they were treated better."

"Huh? What difference does that make?"

Aisha gave a look of open disgust. Anywhere you went, any nation you visited, especially if you spoke to women and children, *nobody* was a fan of goblins. Oh well. I wasn't exactly a goblin rights activist here.

Speaking of political organizing. "Aisha, how's it going with the Mercenary Band?"

"Hmm? How do you mean? I think I'm handling it fine."

"Well, less about how you're handling it, more like if you're getting along with everyone."

I only meant to start up some small talk. I knew, in broad strokes, it was going well. But I wanted to hear the slice-of-life fluff. Like, maybe she went out to eat with everyone, but they all got served something extra spicy, so everyone was breathing fire between quips and small talk.

"Hmm... Good question..."

No fun, just gloom.

Was she being bullied?! If we were home, I would have turned my sirens on and floored it to the Mercenary Band, hauled Linia and Pursena into custody, tossed them into the interrogation room, and gone full bad cop on them until they owned up to their crimes. But I saw the truth just last year; Linia, Pursena, and the entire mercenary band gave Aisha that huge birthday present. All my evidence said Aisha was well-liked among the Mercenary Band.

“Is there something on your mind?” I asked.

“Hmm... I dunno, I just don’t get it, you know?”

“Oh?”

“It’s something I see Norn doing too. They start something and keep at it even if it’s doomed to fail.”

“Well, nobody can *know* they’re going to fail until they try.”

“No, not like that. I mean like, they fail once, then they repeat the same mistake and fail again.”

“Ah, I see.”

People repeat history, huh? Norn was definitely the type to repeat the same mistakes a few times just to be sure. But that was because... Wait, I was getting head of myself. How about I politely let her finish?

“So in the Mercenary Band, I’m an advisor, everyone’s boss, so I warn people when they mess up the same way they did last time. Sometimes I’m harsh. Like, ‘I already told you how to do it, so what’s your problem?’ and stuff.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But they all seem to hate it.”

“Well, nobody *loves* getting yelled at.”

“But if they hate it so much, then why mess up again? I’m even telling them how to do it. Just do it.”

“Just because you tell them what to do doesn’t mean they can put it into practice right away.”

Aisha’s doubtful look told me she didn’t quite understand. Well, that was Aisha; she was a natural. She learned quick, and her memory was a steel trap. Her failures were minor and infrequent, and her successes bordered on perfection. She relentlessly applied any experience or knowledge she gained to anticipating the next challenge.

That's why things that she saw as "the same mistakes" might have looked like average mistakes to an average guy like me. It must have been frustrating for her to see people who *should* have learned their lessons from last time screw up over and over. Then again, the employees Aisha yelled at probably didn't even realize that they *were* making the same mistakes. That could explain why they didn't appreciate Aisha yelling at them all the time.

"So yeah, it's going well, but I'm not sure I'm making any friends..."

"Ah, I see."

Being exceptional meant Aisha left people behind. She thought of herself as capable of anything, as someone who would've succeeded where anyone else might fail. That's why she was so hard on people. It was why she chewed them out.

"But doesn't that make work a little tense?" I asked.

"Umm, when I get mad, Linia steps in and takes them aside. I dunno what she tells them, though. And then, that person always comes back looking relieved."

I see. So Aisha scolded the mercenaries while Linia or Pursena cheered them back up. Like I said, people came in different styles, which made them suited for different jobs.

"Well, here's hoping that you can pick up that part of the job someday, too."

"Ugh..."

Aisha looked visibly annoyed. As though to say, *I'll do it if I have to, but I don't want to.*



If that was what excellence took, I was sure that Aisha had it in her. She could learn to comfort people and give them little pep talks. But that wouldn't necessarily mean she could empathize. That was what I *really* wanted her to learn somewhere down the line; the anguish of someone who just can't get it right, the frustration of someone who wants it desperately and still fails, and the powerlessness of someone who knows what to do, but whose body won't cooperate. If Aisha could learn those feelings, then I was sure her tension with the mercenaries would ease considerably.

If she never did, well... some people live with flaws like that for their entire lives. And they do, you know, okay. But.

"Hey, no rush."

"Yeah, I'm not rushing. Things *are* going well."

And that was what I talked about with Aisha as we wended our way toward Millishion.

We reached the edge of the forest. Seven more days' worth of travel until we hit Millishion. We stopped by a village along the way and bought a horse-drawn carriage. Don't get too excited by the fancy name; it was a rickety old thing better suited for hauling cargo, but hey, it beat walking. The stone tablets weren't exactly light.

We rode the carriage along the highway. This country had more grasslands than the Asura Kingdom, and its agriculture relied more on pasturage than dry farming. If the Asura Kingdom's scenery recalled the waving wheat fields of America, these were the cow pastures of Mongolia. Asura was a land of gold and green, while Millis was a land of blue and green. Both held lush greenery in common; both were bountiful lands. Millis did have more monsters on its roads, but that was about it. Traveling in either country was a leisurely stroll compared to what you'd find on the Demon Continent.

Finally, we arrived: the capital of the Holy Country of Millis, Millishion.

Chapter 7: Cliff's Homecoming

MILLISHION, the capital of the Holy Country of Millis. It'd been a while since my last time in this city; I'd been to the Millis Continent to set up the teleportation circle, but I didn't stop by the capital that time. So, this was only my second visit.

I entered the city through the northern gate back then, and I could still remember what it looked like. The way the river flowed down the Blue Wyrms Mountains into the lake below, the immaculate White Palace floating in the center of that lake, the golden cathedral built by the river, and the silver headquarters of the Adventurers' Guild just a bit downstream. And last but not least, those seven towers surrounding the city with those vast plains stretching out below.

Ah... How did it go again? "This is a place not only rich in majesty, but also in perfect harmony with nature. No other city in the world is nearly as beautiful," right? That scenery looked like it was lifted off the pages of a guidebook I read long ago, so it stuck with me. Man, that took me back. What book was that, again? Ah, yes, *Wandering the World* written by the adventurer Bloody Kant. Whew, that was a few letters off of being a hell of a name.

Uh, anyway, the view of Millishion from the south was still just gorgeous. The tall towers and the tall castle dominated the view. The castle was unblemished silver, glittering in the light. Their shine and size blotted out everything from view but the walls themselves. There was an aesthetic simplicity that guided its design, and it made the already beautiful castle all the more striking.

"Man, there really *isn't* a city in the world more beautiful than this one."

"Beneath the surface, there isn't a city in the world more rotten. I promise you that."

This comment came from Cliff. Guess he heard me talking to myself.

Cliff's sights were set on the White Palace. After all he'd been through, that beautiful castle loomed over him. Of course—he was here

to go to war.

Honestly, I thought that the Asura Kingdom was far more rotten underneath its facade. Ariel and all those nobles' hearts were plenty riddled with decay. Then again, Asura the Kingdom's *surface* was rotten. It didn't bother to hide what it was. In that way, I guess, the pretense might make Millis the worse of the two.

"So, Cliff... I know you're a genius, but..."

"Come now, we're past that, aren't we?"

"Right... Just, if anything happens, feel free to talk to me."

I had way less pressure on me just this moment. As such, I wanted help Cliff bear his burden. Anything was fine, even something as small as buying him a cup of coffee.

"In that case... Could you start by taking this carriage to my home?"

"It shall be done, your future Pope-ness, sir."

That day, Cliff returned to Millishion, his former home. He'd been gone almost a decade.

Millishion had four entrances. One each in the Adventurers' District, the Residential District, the Divine District, and the Commercial District. The last time I came, I entered through the Adventurers' District. If I remember right, it was because out-of-towners were in for a headache if they entered through any other gate. Well, even if I don't remember right, I'm sure that we circled around the city walls and entered through the most packed entrance. And today, we were doing the same thing. Unlike last time, we had Cliff with us, so we didn't have to be picky about the gate. We chose the southern entrance in the Adventurers' District simply because it was closest.

And by "simply," I mean "only." It would have taken less time if we'd traveled unimpeded outside the city instead of wading through the sea of bodies inside of it. Our haste made waste. But Cliff had his own ideas:

"It's been a while, so I want to see the city," he said.

Hey, it *was* his first time being home in a decade. He was going to live here for years to come, but he'd only see it like this once. Walking down the road to your home and reminiscing about how this is still here or that used to be there wasn't an opportunity that came by every day. It had to be now or not at all.

"You got it."

And so, I humored Cliff and took the reins.

"This takes me back," Cliff murmured to himself as we passed underneath Millis's beautiful gate.

Cliff was born in the Divine District, so I heard that he hadn't visited the Adventurers' District much. Still, he looked up at the Adventurers' District gate and squinted his eyes, like he was projecting some personal memory onto the scene. My time in this city, however, lasted only a single week; the only things I remembered all involved Paul. Of course I could get a little emotional about that if I thought it over, but nothing else held any particular resonance for me. When I looked around, didn't see visions of my past. I saw the future. I saw the Mercenary Band I would build in this city.

Adventurers were walking all over around us. There were a lot more beastfolk, elves, and the like here than in the Asura Kingdom. The ranks of the adventurers ran the gamut, but you could more or less tell who was at what level at a glance. Boys and girls of fifteen or sixteen scurried around while equipped in obviously secondhand armor. There was a beginner-rank clad in brand new armor who looked to be eighteen. A mid-rank in his twenties whose equipment was a mix of both new and worn down. A veteran whose equipment seemed worn-down if you didn't know what to look for, but was in fact a mix of magic items and other high-class goods. The spread of adventurer paths was fairly varied, but given that they lived at the foot of the Millis Church, there were plenty of healers and few mages.

By contrast, the Magic City of Sharia had a lot of battle-hardened warriors and plenty of newbie mages. The warriors more or less headhunted from the University of Magic, where they'd find promising mages who were eager to become adventurers. Race-wise, Sharia had a lot of humans and beastfolk. The abundance of beastfolk was likely related to Linia and Pursena's long presence there. Meanwhile, in Ars—the capital of the Asura Kingdom—it was newbies everywhere you looked. The large variety of schools meant that one job didn't

particularly dominate over another, but the racial makeup was almost entirely human. The few non-human races were typically at mid-rank or veteran, and they left for the royal capital soon enough.

Millis's variety in race and expertise likely stemmed from its proximity to the Great Forest. The Great Forest provided fresh blood from beastfolk, elf, halfling, and dwarf races who traveled south to Millis. The city gave adventurers opportunities to prove themselves, after which they'd travel north to challenge the strong monsters of the Great Forest. However, the Great Forest didn't have an Adventurers' Guild, so they made their bases in either Millishion or Zantport. As a result, this city's Adventurers' Guild HQ hosted adventurers of all stripes.

Now, how would I establish a Mercenary Band in a place like this?

In the Asura Kingdom, I had connections with Ariel, which made everything go smoothly. That country had three specific groups: swordsmen, merchants, and nobles. First, commoners who had formal training in swordsmanship but failed to become soldiers or adventurers, and also lacked the connections to find someone to mentor. Second, people raised in a merchant family with some amount of study in the trade, but who lost succession to the family shop to the eldest son and were forced to try their luck on their own. Last, third or fourth sons of lower noble families who were educated on a wide variety of subjects (although they mastered none of them), and who had no hope of succession or marriage.

Once we stitched together that diverse lot into one team, what do you know? We had serious connections. We became the one-stop shop for jobs that solders couldn't take on.

I promoted the fifth son of a high-ranking noble family to branch director back there. Ariel had introduced us. Man, that interview was a *trip*. Aisha and I put on these fake triangular glasses and asked him what he did during the two-year gap before joining the interview.

His response? "I was concealing my identity and actively engaging with the commoners. It taught me not only about the differences in our cultures, but about the importance of deeply understanding each and every business partner you work with." His answer was so perfect that I had to take notice of him.

In practice, he was pretty skilled at holding together a group. He knew the differences between noble and commoner culture inside and

out, so when disputes broke out inside the Band, he was the guy who'd understand both sides and find a solution. He wasn't exactly a magnetic personality, but he was the kind of guy who people *never* hated. Oh, he could handle it. Better than I could, certainly.

Now that they were in his competent hands, I needed to build a Mercenary Band branch here as well. I needed personnel and management. We needed a *mission* for this Mercenary Band. Aisha was taking notes; she'd put off planning until we had eyes on the place. Well, we were here, now, and both looking.

It was too early to set anything in stone based on what little we'd encountered so far; there were naturally going to be plenty of adventurers here in the Adventurers' District, but we had a Divine District, a Commercial District, and a Residential District to explore too. Locals were certainly going to know more than we did. It was best to save our conclusions for after we visited the Divine and Residential Districts.

"I didn't notice it the last time I visited...but there sure are a lot of different races here."

"It's 'cause the Great Forest is so close."

Saying that made me take another look around. This *was* a diverse bunch; from halflings who barely looked ten years old, to elves whose spindly limbs reminded me of those from a wilted tree. I mentioned the beastfolk before, but not the sheer variety of them. I saw dogs, cats, rabbits, deer, mice, tigers, wolves, sheep, bears...

Random thought, but when, like, a beastfolk guy looked at farm animals of their own kind, like cows and pigs, did they feel a little spark, or... No, they probably feel the way humans do when we see monkeys at a zoo. Just an animal.

"Ahh, aaahh..."

"Oh, wait, don't stand up so—"

I glanced behind me to see that Zenith was standing up on top of the cart. Despite the rocking of the carriage and Aisha's hurried attempts to get her to sit down, she continued pointing at something ahead.

Her finger was aimed at...a monkey. Wait, no, that was rude. It was just a monkey-faced man. That reminded me, I don't think I'd ever

seen monkey-like beastfolk. Maybe monkeys were actually rare in this world. Rare enough to make Zenith point at one with joy.

Hm? Had I seen that monkey before? Wait a sec, that wasn't even a beastfolk...

“Oh.”

“Yooo?! It's Zenith and the boss! What brings ya all the way out here?”

It was a demon. And not just any demon.

It was Geese.

“Whew, who'da thunk we'd run into each other all the way out here?”

The moment Geese saw us on the road, he hopped into our carriage. Zero hesitation, as though he owned the dang thing.

“Coincidence is a crazy thing, I tell ya! Wait, what'd you guys come here for, anyway?!”

Geese seemed pretty happy to see us. His grin stretched from ear to ear. Some of that joy was starting to rub off on me.

“Half work, half family.”

“Ah, yeah, I feel that. But listen, you ain't gonna *believe* what I've been through! I'm talkin' tearjerker from start to finish—”

Nobody asked him, but Geese began to recount the tale of what happened to him after we departed back in Sharia. Geese, Talhand, Vierra, and Shierra had all arrived at the Asura Kingdom, just as planned. There, they cashed in the stones of absorption for a massive sum of money. Vierra and Shierra used the money to retire from adventuring. They presumably returned to their hometown; Geese lost track after that, but given the money they had, he figured that they started a business or something.

As for Geese, well...in a not-entirely-unexpected twist of fate, he got addicted to gambling. I wasn't too familiar with it, but the Asura Kingdom apparently had a gambling district that Geese soon became a

regular at. Geese always had a bit of a gambling streak, but the fortune he now had took the limiters off. In a matter of months, Geese had managed to blow every coin to his name.

“I tell ya, things were gettin’ hairy back then. They even took the shirt off my back! All I had left to ante up was my life itself.”

If Geese had been left to his own devices, he would’ve been put in a pair of cement shoes and sent to sleep with the fishes. It was Talhand who had saved him.

Talhand decided it was about time for his next adventure, and decided to peek in on Geese before setting out. Talhand was a little dumbfounded by the mess Geese had gotten himself into, but he still decided to sell off the freshly forged gauntlets he’d just had made to bail out his old party member. Those were gauntlets made with the stones of absorption too; combined with his research costs, they’d represented Talhand’s life savings. Now they were both flat broke. The high cost of living in the Asura Kingdom was suddenly too expensive, so they set off to the south.

If I were in that position, I’d never stick my neck out for someone *that* bad with money, much less travel together with him afterward. But Talhand and Geese went way back, so maybe this was how it went between them. Like, maybe Geese had been the one saving Talhand’s hide in the past.

Hey, that’s friendship for you.

Shirone Kingdom was going through some internal strife that they did *not* want to get involved with, and given that the King Dragon Realm was rumored to be contributing to it, they decided to skip those destinations and go straight to Millis. Revisit an old haunt.

Sometime after that, Talhand struck off by himself, leaving Geese all alone. Geese thought he probably returned to his own hometown.

“What’s that guy thinking, going *home* of all places?” Geese grumbled.

Me? I could sort of understand. It was homesickness. You know, the illness Nanahoshi had a chronic case of. A long journey could make you want to see your family again.

“Are you not going back, Geese?”

“Who, me? You gotta be kiddin’. What am I gonna do in that

boring backwater village? Watch paint dry?”

Well, *can* didn’t mean *always*. Personally, I’m a homebody. Only at home could I find Sylphie’s breasts (health restoration item, touch activated), or Roxy’s breasts (temporarily raise luck stat, touch activated), or Eris’s breasts (time skip power, touch activated).

“I mean, I ain’t alone. That guy had some bad memories or whatever with his hometown, too.”

“Then maybe he wanted to go back and settle the score.”

No matter what might have happened in the past, time changes you. Things you could never forgive in your teens might be things you could find it in your heart to accept in your twenties. By your fifties, you might not even care anymore. Talhand might have compartmentalized that old stuff in his heart and went back to see his home as a different person.

“Well, ’nough about Talhand, I’ve been back in the adventurin’ biz here.”

Apparently, Geese started adventuring again after Talhand left. Important addendum: he hadn’t found any business yet. You know, since he was a demon and had zero combat prowess to speak of.

“So, boss, what broughtcha to this neck o’ the woods?”

“Well, you know the state my mother’s in, so her family called her over to see her. I was traveling here with a friend, so I figured I’d stop by.”

“Ah... Zenith’s fam, huh...”

Geese looked at Zenith with what seemed to be pity. Zenith’s expression was as blank as ever, but she somehow seemed to be in higher spirits than normal. Probably because Geese was here.

“Well, I’ve heard a bit about what kinda place Zenith’s family runs...and lemme tell ya, it doesn’t sound like my idea of fun.”

“Um... What exactly have you heard?”

“I dunno the details, but I hear they’re a buncha stiffs.” Geese shrugged.

Yeah, I kinda knew that before coming, thanks. Regardless, I still had to go.

“Whoa there, we’re almost at the district line. Sorry, but can ya

stop for a sec? Demons like me don't go to the Divine District if we know what's good for us."

I followed Geese's request and stopped the carriage. Geese hopped off to the street below.

"Welp, I'm gonna be stickin' around for a while, so don't sweat, you ain't seen the last of me. Keep on keepin' on, boss!"

Back turned, Geese waved his hand as he walked down the street...until he turned back to face us.

"Boss! Can I ask ya somethin'?!"

"What is it?"

"You remember what Paul said back in that dungeon?"

The dungeon, huh? A lot of things came to mind, but only one rang out in my heart. That must've been the one he meant.

"Yes."

Seemingly happy to hear that, Geese nodded and turned around.

The acquaintance who'd appeared so suddenly had disappeared just as quickly. I had to wonder if our reunion was, in fact, a coincidence. It didn't matter. I was happy to see an old friend and shake some nerves off.

With that on my mind, I continued to the Divine District.

When we finally reached Cliff's house, the sun had already set.

Cliff's house was a lot plainer than I expected. It was a single-building home that looked like it could cozily house a family of three or four. It didn't stand out at all from the neighboring homes... Wait. The Divine District had row after row of identical houses. I assumed that a pope's house would've been a bit more like Ariel's, so this caught me off guard.

"It's pretty small."

Rather than getting angry at my rude comment, Cliff graciously explained. "People of the cloth who serve the main church are all provisioned homes like these. Though my grandfather has a room in the

headquarters, so this house doesn't get much use."

Basically, they were company houses.

"I appreciate you escorting me home. It's rather late, so please, stay the night."

I took a moment to think about Cliff's proposal. Zenith's family home was in the Residential District. It'd take some time to get there. If we visited in the middle of the night it was bound to cause problems, and I wasn't emotionally prepared to meet them while still in my travel clothes. We could go back to the Adventurers' District and come back tomorrow...but all that backtracking felt a little excessive.

I decided to take Cliff up on his offer. "Fair enough. Thank you."

I set down my luggage, took the horse to the stable, and pulled the carriage into the shed, while everyone else took their luggage inside. Or I would have, but as I was steering the carriage, the others opened the front door of the house and something like white smoke tumbled out.

"Achoo!" Aisha sneezed adorably after the scent pricked her nose.

"*Cough...* This is awful... Grandfather didn't so much as clean the place, I see," Cliff cursed as he held a cloth to his nose.

The house was covered in dust.

"I'm not sure it'd be enough to thank you for letting us stay the night, but we'll help you clean up... By which I mean, Aisha will."

"Oh, much appreci—hm?"

"Who, me?!"

Aisha let out a bewildered voice while Zenith shot me a scolding look. Well, Zenith was expressionless, but I could still feel the intent in her gaze. *Hey now, Aisha, don't give me that look too. Have I ever ordered you to clean something alone?*

Oh yeah, all the time. Every little job I could. I appreciated it, I really did...

"H-hey, that was clearly a joke! Of *course* I'll help, too."

"As you should."

So began our big midnight cleanup. After opening the windows and blowing out a large area with wind magic, we broke out the brooms

to take on the rest. After that, we mopped up the rooms we intended to use with a wet rag. Given that the place hadn't been used in years, I also gave the beds and sheets a gust of hot air to kill the insects.

The kitchen was pretty filthy, but Aisha managed to get it presentable all on her own. For real, while Cliff and I were cleaning the living room, Aisha finished the lion's share of the cleaning for every room we'd use. Compared to us, she went three times faster: the Red Comet, Aishar Aznablerat. With that done, we used the remainder of our travel rations to fix ourselves a light dinner.

"Congrats on making it home, Cliff."

"Don't celebrate too early. Not until I've met my grandfather."

We gave a toast with our glasses of water and feasted upon jerky and soup. It didn't quite have the flavor of a home-cooked meal, but it was what it was. We didn't want to lug around a ton of excess ingredients, so we were trying to use up the last of it.

"Rudeus, what will your plan tomorrow be?" asked Cliff.

"First, we visit the House of Latria."

"I see. Will you stay there tomorrow night?"

"I think we probably will."

She might not have had the most generous reputation, but Claire was still Zenith's family. There shouldn't be a problem with us staying for a while. I had work to attend to, such as setting up the Mercenary Band branch and keeping an eye on Cliff, so staying at the Latria home would limit my freedom a bit...but I had to go first to be sure. Worst-case scenario, I'd go say *hi* and find somewhere else to stay.

"I'll need to hire someone who can cook, then..." said Cliff.

"Well, how about I send Aisha over once every couple of days?"

"No, that's quite all right. You all have enough work on your plate," Cliff said with a shrug. "I have someone else in mind, anyway."

We were given the guest room—three people in a tight space. We were family, so we all squeezed into the bed...but Aisha and I were fully grown adults by now. The bed itself was pretty small, nowhere near the size for three adults to sleep side-by-side on. We gave the bed to Zenith instead, while Aisha and I slept on the floor. We made a spot to rest on with cushions and sheets we borrowed from Cliff. The floor

was carpeted, so it was downright luxury compared to camping out.

I set my head down on the pillow and rested on my side. When I did, I found that my eyes met Aisha's, who had apparently made her bedding right next to mine.

"Teehee. Think Miss Sylphie will get jealous if I tell her I slept with you, Big Bro?"

"Come on, we've done it plenty of times on the road."

"Yeah. But, you know, still. Teehee." Aisha enjoyed sleeping with company, so she couldn't hold back her giggles.

Ah, what an adorable smile. If she were Sylphie, I'd have found myself getting horny and pulling her close. Sylphie would have snuggled her way deeper into my arms. But I wouldn't get horny over Aisha, and she didn't have any urge to snuggle into my arms. I loved Aisha, and Aisha loved me, but it wasn't a relationship I felt any sexual desire over. If I had to describe the sensation, it was something quite similar to what I felt for Lucie. You know. Familial love.

"I know it's kinda out of the blue," I asked, "but what do you think now about what Lilia's always been telling you?"

"What my mom's been telling me? Which thing?"

"You know, like serving me, or *servicing* me, stuff like that."

Aisha looked surprised by the question, but she then brought her hand to her chin to consider it more deeply.

"Hmm, I mean I'm not *opposed*... But like, it's just kinda *different* from with Miss Sylphie. Like... Well, I'm not sure what it's *like*, but..."

"No, I get you. You're right, it's just kinda different."

It was all subtext, but we more or less understood one another. We had to feel out each other's meanings.

"Heh heh, glad you understand. This is why I love ya, Big Brother!" said Aisha as she wriggled her way towards me and pressed her body against mine. She was soft and warm, truly a fine hug pillow. As I was enjoying the sensation, Aisha asked something else, as though the thought just came to her.

"I wonder... Will I fall in love with someone someday and want to have children of my own?"

This was probably the thing that was "different" from earlier.

“Good question. Well, why not?”

“But who would it be with...”

Ah, who would be Aisha’s lover? Yeah, I couldn’t imagine. Would he be the perfect-at-everything type, or would he be totally useless? Aisha could probably fit herself in with any partner she made, but I couldn’t see herself liking someone she had to change for. Who did Aisha normally spend time with? The Mercenary Band...lots of beastfolk thattaway. Aisha, with that pack of wild animals? No siree, I’m not giving my little sister to whatever the cat dragged in!

If I asked Orsted, he’d probably know what kind of partner Aisha married...but I think I’ll refrain. I’d feel bad for her if he told me she’d end up an old maid.

Oh, right. I should make sure of something before I fell asleep.

“Aisha, we’re taking my mom to her family’s house tomorrow... So, what’ll you do?”

“...”

Aisha moved out of my arms and took her distance, returning to where she originally lay.

“I’ll go. Mom didn’t make it sound optional.”

“I see...”

“Yep.”

Hearing Aisha’d be there put me at ease. Tomorrow, I’d be visiting Zenith’s home. I’d be going through the usual pitch and making connections, but the thought of going to such a high-class house all alone made me antsy.

“Well, I appreciate the help.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it.”

“Seriously, you’re a lifesaver. And thanks for the cleaning tonight too. Anyway, good night.”

“Mmh, you’re welcome... Good nighdd... *Fwah...*”

I listened to Aisha’s sleepy muttering as I closed my eyes.

Chapter 8: The House of Latria

ZENITH'S FAMILY HOME was huge. It was very close to how I'd imagined it. There was a large gate with a pair of lion statues flanking either side. A long, cobbled walkway ran from the gate to the front door with a fountain smack-dab in the middle, and hedges trimmed into all manner of weird shapes. Behind it all stood a beautiful white mansion. If you looked up "nobleman's mansion" in the encyclopedia, this would've been the picture for it.

We were in the nobles' section of the Residential District, and on a street lined with the homes of the particularly well-to-do. Felt pretty similar to Asura's wealthiest residential district.

But *man*, this place was gigantic. Cliff's house caught me by surprise, but Zenith's family home was spot-on, exactly what I'd thought it'd be. After all, I had one just like it back in the Asura Kingdom. Not to brag, as it was the one Ariel gave me, but it was about this size. The mansion here had a cleaner look to it, but if we're talking conspicuous consumption, mine was equally conspicuous, let's say.

Which is why I had nothing to be afraid of. I wasn't chicken, okay?

"*Hahhh...*" sighed Aisha next to me. She looked at the mansion in disdain.

Right now, the two of us were waiting in front of the gate. I'd dressed in noble-ish clothes I'd changed into back at Cliff's house, while Aisha was in her maid outfit. Zenith accompanied us, dressed in the same kind of fancy clothes as me.

We asked a guy at the entrance who seemed to be guarding the place to receive us. I tried to show him the letter, but he bolted back into the mansion the moment he saw Zenith's face. We were still waiting on him.

"So, um, Big Brother. Just warning you, but Grandma's *really* not a fun person to be around."

"Yes, I heard you the first time."

Her warnings were getting to me. Still, I believed I was vaccinated against awful people. I was a nightmare myself in my past life, after all; pretty much anyone would be a delight by comparison.

So, yeah. I had this.

Even if this were someone I couldn't *stand*, we could still talk about Zenith's condition and mourn what we'd both lost together. Anything beyond that might be too much to hope for, but that would be enough.

"Oh."

I snapped out of my thoughts to find a large contingent of men and women streaming out of the mansion. It wasn't just the guard from before; there were people in butler and maid uniforms. About twenty people in total were now marching on us.

The maids lined up on either side of the walkway beyond the gate. In front of them, a butler faced us, straight as a rod. It was the precise guest reception formation you'd see at a rich person's house in a cartoon. They pulled this all the time in the Asura Kingdom, too.

When the guard opened the door, the butler bowed his head deeply and the maids soon followed suit.

"Lady Zenith, we humbly welcome you home. All of us have, in our hearts, awaited this day."

Their heads were all bowed to Zenith. However, Zenith was as emotionless as ever; her eyes didn't even focus on the servants.

"Now then, Sir Rudeus—the Madam awaits. This way, please."

"Very well, thank you."

Undeterred by Zenith's lack of response, the butler then greeted me before turning on his heel to guide me inside the mansion. He didn't say a word to Aisha. Did he assume all people in maid outfits were maids? Maybe I should have had Aisha wear something else. Something a little more little-sister-like. A frilly dress or something.

As I thought this, I made my way across the walkway and was whisked into mansion's foyer. The inside was, unsurprisingly, decked out with lavish furnishings. Nothing that could compare to what I saw in Asura's royal castle or in Perugia's castle, of course, but at least it was all classy stuff.

“Now then, please wait in here.”

Finally, we were guided to a reception room. Inside there was a pair of sofas facing each other; a flowerpot in the corner; a maid standing against the wall...

Considering everyone was “awaiting” this day, there sure was no sign of the Madam herself. But perhaps what she’d awaited was hearing we got here safe, and now that she had she wanted to freshen up for her guests. We’d find out which soon. I sat Zenith down and took a seat beside her. I glanced over to Aisha and saw she was still standing next to the arm of the sofa.

“Aisha, you sit down, too.”

“Huh? But, uh, I think I should stand...”

“You’re my sister, so you should be a guest here. Come on, take a seat.”

“Um... Okay.”

Aisha followed my suggestion and sat down beside Zenith.

“...”

And for a while, the three of us waited, without a word between each other. Times like these reminded me of when I went to that interview at Philip’s place. Sauros had burst into the room, shouted his lungs out, and left without any further fanfare. Kind of eerie how similar this was. I just hoped that today would go as well as that day...

Now, how did I handle Sauros, again? If I recall, I took the initiative by introducing myself first. I figured that introducing yourself first was polite in any world. Let’s try that again today.

“This way, Madam.”

As I finished that thought, the door opened. A tense-looking old lady, her blonde hair streaked with white, entered the room. Following her was a portly, mustachioed middle-aged man wearing what looked like a lab coat. Pretty sure that guy wasn’t the *Madam*; I immediately stood up, lifted my hand to my chest, and gave a casual greeting.

“What an unparalleled pleasure to meet you, Grandmother. My name is Rudeus Greyrat. I’ve come today so I may...”

“...”

The old lady didn’t so much as glance me. She swept right past my

introduction and made a beeline for a good view of Zenith. She stared intently at Zenith's face, inspecting her from a footstep away. I'd envisioned a heartwarming reunion...but Claire's stony expression shattered my fantasy.

Finally, Claire exhaled. She spoke in an almost icy tone, "This is indeed my daughter. Ander, if you'd please."

With that, the mustached man stepped forward. He elbowed past me, took Zenith's hand, and stood her up. Then, he lifted his own hand to Zenith's blank face...

"Wait, hold on a moment! Mind telling me what's up?" I hurriedly interjected.

"Ah, my apologies. I am Madam Claire's personal physician, Ander Berkeley."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Rudeus Greyrat. You've studied medicine?"

"Yes. I was originally here for a scheduled checkup on Madam Claire, but she said to have a look at her daughter while I had the opportunity..."

I see, so that was it. Grandma Claire must have gotten a bit overwhelmed seeing Zenith like this. I could totally understand.

"Well, if that's the case, then please take care of—"

"Who gave you permission to sit?!"

As I was about to say, "my mother," a scolding voice bellowed from behind me. I tensed involuntarily from the shock, but I turned around to see that Aisha had frantically stood up from the sofa.

"A mere maid does *not* remain seated while her master stands! You were not raised in a barn!"

"M-my apologies!" stammered Aisha, bowing her head despite being on the verge of tears.

Whoa, whoa. Hold on. *What* on earth? I need to catch my breath. This was all going too fast. And Claire was treating me like I was invisible? I could've started crying, too.

"I told her to sit down," I said firmly. *That* got Claire to slowly turn and fix her stare on me. Damn. Maybe I *didn't* want her attention... Well, too late now. Time to roll with it.

“She may be wearing a maid uniform, but she’s my sister first. I’m having her tend to our mother’s needs, so she simply chose something practical for that kind of work. I’m afraid it’s unacceptable to treat her as ‘only’ a maid.”



“One dresses for the station they deserve. In this house, those who dress as maids will be treated as maids.”

Uh, screw these house rules in particular.

“Well then, how would you treat someone in clothes like mine?”

“I would treat you appropriately, of course.”

“Should I assume that your idea of ‘appropriate’ treatment is complete disregard?”

As I talked, I spread my arms open and looked down at my outfit. I wasn’t wearing anything strange...I thought. Where did I get these? Probably somewhere in Sharia... Should I have worn the clothes I bought in the Kingdom of Asura? No, those were for parties...

“No, I... *delayed my response*...because you were a man I’d never met who swanned in and called me ‘grandmother.’ There’ve been no dearth of swindlers doing the same these past few years. I’d first determine if you were worth my time by verifying the truth.”

“Ah... Well.”

Hey, if it was common knowledge that a big fancy manor had a runaway daughter, it was no surprise that people would try to worm their way in by claiming to be lost relatives. I might have introduced myself, but I hadn’t presented any proof of my identity. These clothes weren’t even embroidered with the Greyrat family emblem, and anyone could have gotten that done anyway. I guess she had a point.

“This is the real Zenith, to be sure. And I remember Aisha over there quite well. But do you have any proof that you are my grandson?”

Proof, huh? I mean, that’s a tough one. I’d brought Zenith, Aisha, and even the letter. What more did she... Wait, why was I having to *prove* myself to begin with?

“Is that necessary?”

“Pardon?”

“I brought Mom...er, Zenith and Aisha, and I even provided the letter I received from you. What more do you need?”

Claire’s eyebrow twitched in response.

“If that is all, then I’m afraid I can’t recognize you as a member of the House of Latria.”

“Very well. I belong to the House of Greyrat... I’m the head of that household, and today is my first time ever setting foot upon this property. I have no intention of asserting myself as a member of the House of Latria.”

As an ally of it? For the sake of the Mercenary Band, yes, that I was angling for. But if the other party already held me with suspicion, then I needed to play my intentions closer to the vest than I’d planned. My first priority was to bring Zenith home to her family.

Claire didn’t seem to appreciate my answer; her eyes narrowed as her brows twitched with pent-up tension.

“For the ‘head’ of the House of Greyrat, you present as tawdry. Greyrat is one of the Four Great Houses of Asura... As distinguished as the House of Latria may be, we are merely a countship. Yet you would give your name first and lower your head not even to the Count himself, but to the *wife* of the Count?”

“I have the blood of one of the Four Great Houses, but I’m not from the main branch, nor do I have any titles. While I called myself head of my household, that was merely to say that I am the main provider for an ordinary family living in Sharia. And of course, even if I *did* possess some sort of high status, I feel it only natural to show some respect when meeting my own grandmother for the first time.”

“Hm... Is that so?”

I got the feeling that my explanation only made Claire look down on me more. No, she couldn’t be that bad... But then again, this person placed family lineage on a high pedestal. It was going to be a pain, but I decided to give myself a line of defense just in case.

“I may have no rank as a *noble*, but I do have a personal relationship with Her Majesty Queen Ariel, who was crowned ruler of the Asura Kingdom just last year. I myself am also a subordinate of the second of the Seven Great Powers, the Dragon God Orsted. I would prefer if you took *those* stations into account.”

Not that I needed to be taken seriously, but her interaction with Aisha changed things. She needed to consider me an equal, or at least something close to it, to be of any kind of use to me.

Claire pursed her lips and raised her chin in response. She looked me over, as though trying to decide what I was worth.

“This is my proof of being the Dragon God’s subordinate.”

I brought out my bracelet that had the Dragon God’s emblem. After looking at it for a few seconds, Claire turned to a butler that had been at her side and asked him something in a hushed voice. The butler nodded. I heard the words, “Indeed, that is the Dragon God’s—” from him. I didn’t think the Dragon God was particularly well-known, but this butler seemed to recognize his emblem. *Please* don’t say it could easily be faked.

“I see... Understood.”

With that said, Claire squared her jaw and brought her hands together around her stomach. Then, in one natural motion, she bowed her head.

“My name is Claire Latria. Wife to Commander of the Temple Knights’ Sword Company, Count Carlisle Latria. I am currently tasked with the management of this mansion. I ask that you please forgive my poor manners.”

I either successfully proved my identity, or my attitude overcame some sort of hurdle. I didn’t know which, but whatever. I got Claire to lower her head and apologize.

A Commander of the Temple Knights, huh? Zenith’s little sister Therese also marched in those ranks. This family sure had deep ties to them.

“Then please allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Rudeus Greyrat, son of Paul Greyrat and Zenith Greyrat. I currently work as a subordinate to the Dragon God Orsted. Don’t worry about what happened before. I failed to perform my due diligence myself. I think that your caution was perfectly warranted.”

We both bowed to each other, so the matter was as good as settled. Phew, maybe I could finally catch a breath. The greeting alone was like pulling teeth, but hey, I got it done.

“Now then, please take a seat.”

“Certainly, thank you.”

I did as I was told and sat down.

“First, let me commend you on your long journey,” said Claire. “I had assumed your voyage would take a few more years, but I’m quite thankful for your swift arrival.”

Then, with a clap of her hands, the door opened. A maid pulling a cart entered the room; atop the cart was a tea set. A tea party? Fine by me. She'd better prepare herself to be blown out of her seat by the explosive tea technique I mastered at the floating fortress.

But before that, I figured I'd let Aisha sit down. She wasn't a maid, she was my sister. I couldn't have her be welcomed as anything less than a guest, so I had to be firm about this.

"Aisha, you sit down, too."

"Huh? But..."

"You're not a maid today. You came here as my relative, so please, sit down."

Aisha glanced back and forth at Claire as she slowly settled into her seat. Claire didn't say a word; she only responded with a twitch of her eyebrow. Looked like she was going to let it go. But of course; Aisha belonged to *my* family, after all, so it wasn't Claire's place to allow or forbid.

I glanced over at Zenith. It looked like she was still being inspected by that doctor; he was now looking her eyes and tongue. I didn't think he'd find what was wrong in there, but no harm trying. Claire probably wanted a doctor she trusted to take a look first before believing some stranger that Zenith had lost her memories.

"We've done our best to try and heal Mom, but we haven't had any luck."

"Well... I can imagine how some backwater town has very few options."

Ooh, now them's fightin' words. Whatchu callin' a backwater town, lady?

But, of course, I had anticipated she'd say that sort of thing. No surprises here.

"Sharia's healing magic might be a tad less advanced than Millis's...but I had her looked at by Orsted, a man familiar with every branch of magic there is, and Perugius, an expert on teleportation and summoning."

"Perugius? One of the three legendary heroes? Hm... I'm not sure I find that plausible."

Figures. I could understand why she wouldn't believe me. That said, I couldn't exactly pack him in my bags for a family trip; I was only riding on his coattails, anyway. Either way, I intended to stay in Millishion for a few months. Plenty of time for Claire to accept that there was no treatment for Zenith's condition. I just hoped they wouldn't insist on trying something drastic before reaching that conclusion.

"Incidentally...what of Norn?"

I was hoping we'd stick to talking about Mom a bit longer, but Claire suddenly changed it. Norn, huh?

"She's currently enrolled in the Ranoa University of Magic. She's quite busy with her schoolwork, so I left her to continue her studies."

"Is that so? I was under the impression that the girl was a born failure, but is she making something of herself?"

"She's doing fine, yes. She's currently the student council president, so if anything, she's at the top of the school."

I might have put a little spin on it, but Claire seemed surprised. I didn't expect her to think *that* poorly of Norn. I guess I could see it if she compared her to Aisha.

"I see. What are her plans after graduation?"

"She hasn't decided yet."

"What of marriage?"

"I'm afraid she's a stranger to romance."

Claire's face scrunched up in response. Did I say something that offended her?

"In that case, she will come here once she graduates," she commanded, leaving no room for argument. Did she even consider the distance between here and Sharia? A round trip would take years to finish... Well, I had the teleportation circle, so I could manage it in a week.

"I wouldn't be opposed, but..."

"I can't imagine that she'd find a half-decent suitor in a backwoods country like Ranoa Kingdom, so I'll arrange the appropriate match."

Hm. What'd she mean by that? "Arrange" what?

“You mean to say, you’d *make* Norn marry someone?”

“That is exactly what I mean. If she has no future set and the head of the household isn’t settling the matter, then I’ll take on the duty myself.”

“Whoa, hey, hold on a moment. Shouldn’t you be asking for Norn’s opinion fir—”

“What are you *talking* about? Is it not the head of the household’s duty to ensure the women of his home marry?”

Um... Is it? I looked to Aisha for answer. She simply shrugged, her attitude seeming to say, “Yeah, kinda.” Maybe this was how the nobles in the Holy Country of Millis did things?

Oh. Right. Even in my old life, there was a part of society where parents decided who their children would marry. It never really made sense to me, but it might have been a more common idea than I’d realized.

But I didn’t run my house like this. Of course, if Norn told me that she wanted to marry and needed my help finding someone, then I’d gladly set her up on a blind date. But outside of that, I wanted her to be free to do what she liked.

“I’ll take responsibility for Norn’s future,” I said. I figured it was best to make that clear.

“I see, very well... You *are* the head of the house, so I expect you to do your job.”

Ah, biting condescension. She seemed to use that a lot, didn’t she? I could feel how she was looking down on me. Keep it together, Rudeus. This was all par for the course. I knew going in that she was going to be difficult. And besides, I wasn’t going to change her; objecting to that would just start a fight over something we’d never see eye-to-eye on. This was our first time meeting each other, so we had to start by understanding each other first. I could make my requests after that.

“I believe I’ve finished.”

While I was taking a deep breath, Ander returned with Zenith. Aisha sprang into action to guide her to the sofa.

“How was it?”

“Her body is the definition of health. So healthy she looks younger

than her age.”

So said the doc. Nice going, Zenith. You look younger without so much as a skincare routine! Or, wait, was that a bad sign? Something to worry about? Like, maybe it was a side effect of a curse?

“I have a few questions for the family. May I?”

“But of course, ask whatever you like.”

“Very well. First...”

His questions covered all the bases. Some questions concerned her physical health; what she typically ate, and in what servings, how much exercise did she get, did she have her time of the month, stuff like that. Others concerned her mental health; how independent was she in day-to-day life, what were her typical habits, did she self-harm, and so on. They were all doctorly questions, so I didn’t hesitate to unload everything I knew, with Aisha stepping in when needed to provide further background. We probably could have given an even fuller picture if Lilia were here, but she wasn’t. We did the best we could.

“I see, very well,” Ander said as he nodded and took notes on all my answers. When he was done, he went to Claire, where the two murmured something between themselves.

“Well?” Claire asked.

“Hmm, yes. I believe there’ll be no problems,” Ander answered. “As long as a personal maid attends to her, at least. There’s no sign of illness or injury. Her state of mind is stable as well.”

“What about fertility?”

“She has her time of the month, so I presume she’s capable... This would require a few more attending to her, but it should indeed be possible.”

“Wonderful.”

What was so “wonderful” about that? I got the feeling that I wasn’t going to like what they were talking about.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you sounded like you’re planning to have my mom remarry,” I joked.

I *intended* it as a joke. But the look in Claire’s eyes when she turned them toward me was ice-cold. Ice-cold, yet incredibly strong-willed. It was a look that demanded obedience and would not take no

for an answer.

“Here in the Holy Country of Millis, a woman’s worth is decided by her ability to bear children. Those who cannot are sometimes not even seen as human.”

Hold on, let’s pull back a bit. She didn’t deny what I said, but...no way, right? No, calm down. She didn’t deny it, but she also didn’t confirm it. She just stated the typical beliefs of her nation. Nobody would *possibly* see someone as less than human because they couldn’t give birth; it just sounded believable because it came from such an authoritative old lady.

“Ah, before I forget. You two, cut ties with that papalist priest.”

“I... Huh?”

“I’m aware that you two are acquainted with a papalist priest.”

Yet another change of subject. I was starting to get disoriented. Maybe it was Claire’s blunt tone that kept me from taking control of the conversation. Or maybe greeting her first backfooted me. This was her territory, not mine.

“True, I do have an amicable relationship with Cliff...but why would it be necessary to cut ties with him?”

“The House of Latria currently operates on the side of the cardinalists. I forbid you to fraternize with a papalist.”

So, “cardinalist” meant demon expulsionists? I wondered who the top cardinal was.

“I mean... I have no intention of aligning myself with the papalists, so would that not suffice?”

“No, I forbid it. If you are to stay at this house, then you will follow the *rules* of this house.”

Hmm. Hmmm. Well, yeah, I’d probably end up aligning with the papalists once Cliff had obtained some level of status. If she was aware of my plans and trying to gain some leverage over me, I could potentially be a bit more understanding. But I got the feeling that that wasn’t where she was coming from...

“Cliff has been a great help to me back in school. I’m certain Norn could say the same... Surely a simple friendship wouldn’t do any harm, no?”

“Unacceptable. If you insist on fraternizing with this papalist priest, then I shall not allow you to stay in this house.”

No dice. All right. I get it. Fine, then. For now, I’d stay the night somewhere else.

Yep, I was fine. Not angry. Not even a little bit. Having a completely normal one over here. Tranquility was my middle name. Nothin’ to fuss over. I’d been told over and over this was the kind of person Claire was. I was prepared for this. It might not have been within my calculations that she’d butt into my personal friendships... but hey, we were like cats and dogs. We just couldn’t get along. That’s all there was to it.

Now, to give a polite goodbye and leave this house without starting a figh—

“Leave Zenith here and begone at once.”

My mind stopped.

“To be clear, I will permit you to enter the premises of this mansion in the future, but ultimately as a stranger to this hou—”

“What do you mean, ‘leave her here’? What do you mean by that?”

The words that came out of my mouth were a response to what she’d said a sentence earlier; it took a few seconds for my brain to function again.

Claire cut herself off, looked at me, and answered with an icy glare.

“Given what’s become of her, I have no other choice. She might only be *this*, but if she can bear children, then marriage is still an option.”

My mouth went dry. My peripheral vision blacked out, like I was being blanketed in a dark mist.

“...”

What the fuck are you talking about?! someone shouted.

It was me. I was shouting.

No way, you were just saying the beliefs of the nation, right? Did you actually mean that crap?!

Or, so the shouts continued. Except the words didn't come out. My mouth went through the motions without emitting a single sound.

"I'll have this girl marry a cardinalist noble. It might take a few divorces, but we should find her a permanent match."

Claire would force a person who couldn't even communicate her own opinions into a marriage. Claire would say that her own daughter was "only *this*." As though she was just an object.

"Her good health is quite the silver lining."

I'd never heard the sound of a blood vessel bursting. Of course not, because it wasn't audible. It was just a cartoon sound effect, a figure of speech. I might have *imagined* I'd heard it whenever I got Eris mad, but since I typically blacked out shortly afterwards, I couldn't remember much.

Today I heard it. No question.

The next thing I knew, the sun had set and I was pulling Zenith along by the hand.

I didn't remember much of what happened after that sound. I recalled absolutely hollering, but I was foggy as to what I'd hollered about. I knew for sure that insults from far outside my daily vocabulary had flown out of my mouth. I remembered Claire's eyes widening. I remembered maids peeking in to see what the commotion was. I remembered declaring that I would leave, pulling Zenith up by the hand, and hearing Claire having the nerve to say, "You shall not. If Zenith were sane, she'd agree." Those words were throwing oil onto flame that was my heart, burning down what remained of my self-control; I clenched my fists and prepared to cast a spell. That was what I remembered.

But just then, I heard Aisha say, "Sic 'em, Bro," which brought me back to *some* of my senses. Claire had already called the guards by now, so I blasted them away, shouted that the House of Latria was dead to me and mine, and bolted out.

"Phew..."

At some point, we found that we'd returned to the border of the Divine District. My rage made it feel like my vision was spinning. I never imagined that I'd hear something that loathsome with my own ears. *Son of a bitch*. "Silver lining," my ass. I shouldn't have come. I could have gone my whole life without hearing that.

Who died and crowned that old bat king? Like, look. Anyone would feel a little grossed out if some guy you'd never met called you his grandmother. Don't feel like responding to my first introduction? Sure. Don't. I could even understand the stuff about getting Norn a husband. I'd heard that the rich and powerful arranged their marriages in my old life, too. They were just doing what was expected in their class and culture. Fine.

Yeah, I got it.

But what she said about Zenith was way over the line. My mother had amnesia and couldn't even take care of her own basic needs. What is *wrong* with someone who would even *consider* marrying her off? And talk about her "good health"? About how it was the "silver lining" that she had her time of the month? You'd have Zenith marry so that she could be nursed during the day and *messed with* at night? Yeah, I knew what to call that. A human sex doll.

And if she got pregnant, then what? She'd give birth? You really think she'd be *capable* of that? Even if she *could*, where was Zenith's consent in all of this? Hell, what about my feelings? How do you think the children she'd leave behind would feel? What do you take a man's mother for?! What do you take your own *daughter* for?! Was your daughter a tool to you? Just a thing to be used, a baby-making machine? Don't even *joke* about that!

I couldn't remember the last time something made me this *mad*. "Claire," my ass! Go stuff yourself with cream, you French pastry!

"Phew..."

I'd arrived at such a bizarre insult that I calmed down a little. I also heard my stomach start to rumble. Right, I was hungry; I hadn't eaten anything for lunch. I could go for anything besides pastries.

"U-um, Big Brother?"

I turned around after hearing my name to find Aisha stood there fidgeting. She looked troubled, as though she didn't know what to say.

“Aisha.”

Without a word, I reached out my arm and held her close. She didn't hesitate to sidle right in.

I now knew why Aisha, Norn, and Lilia dragged their feet so much. I couldn't blame you; of course you wouldn't want to relive that. I didn't know what Aisha and Norn had gone through as they grew up with her, but now I understood they must be carrying some awful memories.

“I'm sorry for bringing you.”

“N-no, it's fine. But, well, you didn't make your connection, right?”

Kuh-nek-shuhn? Confection? Convection?

Connection.

Oh, yeah. I was hoping I'd get to have the House of Latria's help with building the Mercenary Band.

“Oh well, we'll live. I'd rather do it alone than have help from *her...*”

I could make connections with someone else. Maybe I could ask Cliff to put in a good word for me with his grandpa... He might not be impressed with me asking for favors already, but it'd be payback to Claire. And if that went nowhere, then I'd just get it done, alone.

Either way, I was tired. I wanted to go home and sleep... Ah, come to think of it, I didn't have a place to stay, did I? It'd be the middle of the night by the time we got to the Adventurers' District and got a room, and I didn't want to make Zenith walk that far.

All right, fine. I'd ask to stay with Cliff again.

With that decided, it was back to Cliff's place.

Chapter 9: Headquarters of the Millis Church

NOW THAT MY WASTED meeting with Claire had concluded, I returned to Cliff's residence in low spirits. What I saw when I got there knocked the wind out of me. Inside that house, I saw Cliff and a woman I'd never seen before holding each other in their arms.

The woman had a humble air to her. She was petite, freckled, and had short, bright brown hair. She was slender overall, but I there was real softness to her, like she'd never had a worry in her life and it'd made her sweet.

She looked similar to Elinalise, yet different. If Elinalise was a cat in heat, then this girl was a spayed dog. But here's what really got me: I didn't know this girl.

Not you, Cliff. Not after all those lectures you gave me over the same thing... Did you really leave Elinalise behind for this? What about Elinalise's heart? She might've been a horndog, but she's the mother of your child... Did you hold a candle for someone else?

Cliff, please, tell me it isn't true. The House of Latria just let me down, so if you aren't who I thought you were, I wouldn't know what to believe in. Ah, damn it all, whatever happened to true love? Oh Sylphie, Roxy, Eris, anyone, I beg you, pull me close and whisper sweet nothings into my ear so that I can keep going...

"Oh, Rudeus, good timing. Could you get the box on top of that shelf? We're not tall enough to reach it even with a step stool."

"Oh, sure."

Cliff had untangled himself from the girl at some point while I was narrating my next episode preview. He wasn't even blushing or anything. Apparently, he just caught her when she nearly fell off of her step stool.

"Wendy, are your ankles all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you."

They had a normal, boring conversation as I brought down the box. I blew off the last of the dust from yesterday and handed it to Cliff.

“Sorry about that. I think this is it... Yep, it is. Thank goodness, now I’ll be all right tomorrow.”

Cliff took out what looked like an iron-on patch from the box. It was the emblem of the Millis Church. I guess he needed it for work?

“Anyway, Rudeus, what brings you here? Were you not going to stay the night at the Latria home?”

That question made me lean in; I wanted to tell Cliff all about that circus.

“Yeah, about that. Listen to *this*...”

I let my fury take the wheel as I gave Cliff a full account of the day’s events. About how I went to the House of Latria. About what Claire said and how she acted. About how I couldn’t stand the indignity and went ballistic, leaving the mansion immediately after. I was quite a bit calmer, but I could still barely contain my anger. Just the thought of it pissed me off again.

“Hmm...”

Cliff’s face hardened as he listened to me. He was a saint among saints, so I was certain he’d have my back on this.

“True, the nobles in Millis have a tradition in which the parents decide their children’s marriage partners, and there are even some people who say that bearing children is what makes a woman a woman...but even I find it questionable to marry off someone who can’t speak for herself.”

“I know, right?”

It was inhumane. It was downright monstrous. I consider myself hard to shock, but even I couldn’t overlook that. I couldn’t believe that *person* was Zenith’s mother. Where is God in all in any of this? Wait, right, she was in the Magic City of Sharia.

“Perhaps we should consider Madam Claire might be in shock, given what happened to her daughter, and so suddenly. Imagine if it happened to your own child... You could understand, no?”

Cliff sounded like he was trying to reason with me. Part of me was hoping he would share my anger. But from Cliff’s perspective, there had to be another side to this story. He must have wanted to stay calm and think about it from the other point of view.

So, I gave it some thought. My own children, huh? Maybe Lucie... No, it was still a bit hard to imagine for her. I tried with Norn instead. Let's say that Norn left on a journey as soon as her coming-of-age celebration ended; just when I think she's returned, her personality is dead. And worse, she came with the child of a man I didn't know and a mistress's child she had no blood ties with. I'd certainly be in shock. I'd want to do *something* for her...

But.

"No matter how shocked someone became, I can't see how anyone would think about making Mom remarry."

"This may not be as callous as you think. Putting the talk of children aside, having her marry a noble would ensure that she'd be taken care of. Even after the parent's death."

That was not the conversation we had. It was more like she wanted to recycle a tool because it still had some utility left. This was my *mother* we were talking about. Her own daughter, who I brought all the way here. Seriously, what the hell was her problem? I swear...

I could remember Claire's face when I went ballistic in her mansion. Even when the shock waves from my Stone Cannon sent her guards flying down the halls, she was cold. As though she couldn't understand why this boor was wrecking the place over nothing.

To be fair, I saw my memories through my own filter. Claire could have been taken aback, her face simply frozen in fear. But that didn't change the words that came out of her mouth beforehand.

"Still, I understand the situation you're in. You're free to use my home as you wish."

"Thank you very much, Cliff."

"This is papal territory. Even if the House of Latria wishes to make a move, they won't be able to touch you here."

Cliff's assurance made me realize that I hadn't actually considered the possibility of retaliation from the Latrias. As far as I was concerned, Claire and I were through; we would never see one another again. But the House of Latria might have their own ideas. They might try to get Zenith back. If that were the situation, we needed to get Zenith to Sharia.

"It would be a shame if your mother had to turn right around just

after arriving in her hometown,” Cliff said.

“Hrm...”

Millis *was* Zenith’s hometown. Now that Cliff mentioned it, I was sure she would prefer to stay a little longer. If I could make time for it, I would have loved to take her around to all the sights.

“But still...”

“Zenith’s needs will be taken care of while you’re out,” Cliff said, turning to the new girl. “She might be a bit of a klutz, but you can trust her.”

“Oh, Cliff, about that...who is she?”

“Ah, my apologies. I forgot to introduce you. Her name is Wendy. If I had to describe it... Yes, I’d say our relationship is similar to what you and Sylphie have.”

“I see. I understand completely.”

A relationship like mine and Sylphie’s... I see, so that’s how it was. Every last mystery had been solved. Opening up the cat box revealed that, indeed, only one truth prevailed.

“Don’t worry, I won’t rat you out to Elinalise.”

“No, wait. Hold on! Don’t jump to conclusions, it’s not like that.”

Cliff hurriedly explained what he meant. While Cliff was handling paperwork at the church headquarters, he was also setting up his household. One of the things he apparently needed was a helper, which brought Cliff to the orphanage he used to live at. As part of the orphanage’s job training program, it taught its children how to cook and perform housework, so Cliff recruited one from there.

“Wendy here was the oldest child there. She’s almost at the age where she’ll have to leave the orphanage, in fact. That wasn’t the *reason* I chose her, per se, but for now, she’ll be commuting here to help with the house. Doing housework here will give her real work experience too.”

So, she was more or less hired as an intern. Working at the home of Cliff, the pope’s grandson, was sure to impress future employers. She’d have an edge in the job hunt.

“I’m Wendy. I can handle all sorts of housework. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Just like Sylphie,” he says. That phrasing made me think something scandalous was going on, but basically, they were old friends who used to play together as kids. But while I didn’t know Wendy’s exact age, I had to wonder if Cliff wouldn’t have a moment of weakness with this young girl...

Nah, Cliff would be fine. It wasn’t like he was me or anything.

“...”

Anyway, storming out of the Latria home was a huge wrench in the works. At this point, it might be best to stop and take Zenith home before continuing. But after Claire’s objectification of Zenith made me flip my lid so bad, I at least wanted to give her a nice walk around the city with me... Ugh, was I being careless? Perhaps I should wait for Cliff to establish himself first. Then we could team up and knock the House of Latria down several pegs, and *then* we could take risks like that. True, there was no guarantee that things would go so smoothly...

“Aisha,” I asked, “What do you think?”

“Uh... Huh?”

When in doubt, talk it out. I wanted to hear Aisha’s opinion.

“Do you think we should take Mom back home and come back? Or do you think we should stay at this house for a while and let her sightsee around the city when we find the time?”

After I asked, Aisha crossed her arms to think. But not for long; she soon raised her head and looked toward Cliff.

“Is this house *really* a safe place?”

“Yes. It may be small, but the Latrias won’t be able to touch us here. Not without causing quite a stir.”

“What are the chances that the Latrias would make a move knowing full well what the consequences were?”

“Slim to none, I would assume. That house has their own reputation at stake.”

Reputation, huh? Given how much lineage mattered to that old woman, she’d definitely take that into account. She may be stubborn and rotten to the core, but she wasn’t an idiot.

“I think we’ll be fine,” Aisha concluded as she unfolded her arms. “It’s just a hunch, but I don’t think that house...that *person* sees much

value in Mother Zenith after what happened to her. I think.”

She had a point. The Latrias surely weren’t going to use Zenith as a key part of any plan. Cliff said as much earlier; marrying someone who couldn’t even speak might have fit into the nation’s values, but it would raise eyebrows. And considering that the partners would be forced onto each other, it was hard to imagine the bonds of their matrimony would be terribly strong.

Maybe she wanted to make good on her investment in the Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad, but if so, she could bill me. Give me a number and I’d pay her to go away. It was safe to say that they had absolutely no emotional bond. If it were, then there was no way she would have treated Zenith like a *thing*.

“I think today taught them that they ought to be afraid of you, Big Brother. They didn’t send anyone to chase after us, either. I don’t think they’re very attached to Mother Zenith.”

Points were being made. We took our time coming back from the Latria home, and even then, nobody came after us. Claire could have easily reported me and had soldiers go after me. I didn’t know if she feared me or simply stopped caring, but she knew the rapport I had with Cliff. While I had no clue *where* she got that info from...the fact remained that given what happened, it would’ve been easy to guess that this home would be my hideout. And yet, she left us alone.

“It’d be one thing if it were a place they could do something about, but we’re under protection in enemy territory. I think we’ll be fine.”

“I see.”

It was high-risk, low-reward. With stakes like that, it was hard to imagine that they’d try to take Zenith back by force. Atta girl, Aisha. You really thought this through.

“In that case, Rudeus,” Cliff interjected, “I’ll be meeting my grandfather tomorrow, so would you care to come along? Causing trouble with the House of Latria will surely make your future endeavors in this country more difficult... I’m sure you want connections, no?”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, it depends on you as to whether you gain my grandfather’s backing. I’ll introduce you, but I won’t do more.”

“Oh, of course.”

Cliff had refused my assistance, and I had no intention of providing it directly. I wasn't sure exactly how much he'd be willing to acknowledge me professionally. I'd assume that introducing people to enlist them as allies was an intervention Cliff didn't want me to make. But it seemed that Cliff was willing to swallow his pride and introduce me anyway.

Helping Zenith was important, but I also had to make progress in building the Mercenary Band. Having the pope's backing would work towards both goals. I didn't exactly need the pope to personally provide Zenith protection; just having a connection with him would make it hard for them to interfere.

“It'd be an honor,” I answered after finishing my calculations. I bowed my head to Cliff.

Hey, I had other things to do here in Millis, so I had buck up and get back to it.

The next day. After breakfast, I headed to the church headquarters. I left Aisha and Zenith at home.

The church headquarters, being a gold-colored building with a giant onion on top, was a little hard to miss. The tranquility so valued in the Holy Country of Millis was reflected in the many shades of white and silver it was swathed in. And then there was this single, sparkly building with its downright clownish gaudiness. And with that gilded onion on top, the whole thing stuck out. Tacky.

From afar, it wasn't too bad. It looked like a golden accent perched atop its white and silver surroundings. But once you got close, the effect fell apart. It came from a different planet.

But a trashy home didn't necessarily reflect on its resident. After all, this was the headquarters of the Millis Church. It was basically filled with upgraded Cliffs, fresh off the production line. It might have *looked* in poor taste, but the fact that surely only the purest of saints lived inside...was far from guaranteed. I knew that much.

In my past life, everyone knew that politicians and religious

leaders were the most corrupted by money. At least, that's how I saw it. It seemed to hold true for this world, too. And the people who held so much power that they didn't even try to fake it always went mask-off in the end. Then again, keeping *that* crowd at arm's length shouldn't pose any problems.

I took a deep breath and prepared to market myself. I'd show off my deep ties to Orsted and Ariel to make myself look big. I think that was one of my failures at the Latria home; it could have been why Claire looked down on me until it all went to hell.

But today, I would be the most interesting man in the world. For him. That was why I came in my formal robes; they were what I wore when I meant business. I was the Right Hand of the Dragon God, Rudeus Greyrat. I talked myself up a little in my head.

"My apologies, but I can't allow anyone who doesn't have a permit inside."

I got stopped at the entrance to one of the buildings. Sob.

"Huh? Is my entrance permit not enough? I could have sworn that companions used to be able to enter with one..."

"The rule's always been one person per permit."

"I see. Hmm. Guess people looked the other way since I was a child back then..."

Cliff eyed the patch he'd found last night with a troubled expression. Apparently, that was the permit. He was currently wearing his official Millis Church vestment. The patch was sewn onto the vestment's breast last night.

"You already have a permit, Reverend Cliff, so I believe you can ask for them to issue a temporary permit inside."

"Ah... Yes, that's right. Apologies, Rudeus. I'll get a permit for you, so wait for me here," Cliff said apologetically.

"I understand. I'm in no rush, so feel free to take your time."

I did as I was told and watched Cliff disappear inside. I stumbled at the first hurdle...but hey, at least I didn't get kicked out before the starter pistol. I decided to take a stroll around the complex for a bit.

The complex was wide, and the building was huge. It was easily four times the size of the Latria home. The building was four stories tall,

and from a bird's-eye view, the whole place was structured like a diamond on top of a square. That is, rather than overlapping to make an octagon, one square was inset inside the other. The diamond was *inside* of the square.

The square on the outside consisted of the office building for the church headquarters. That was probably where all the office workers related to the church and regular priests pushed their paper. They seemed to handle religious conversion permits, funeral arrangement applications, and even sales of symbolic charms. That was headquarters for you; if you had any business with the Millis Church, this was the place for it.

The inner diamond held the Millis Church Curia's residential and office space. It even had holy statues and temples. As a rule, only the highest of the top brass were permitted to enter; not even the office workers here were told what went on in there. It was the nucleus of the Millis Church. No wonder you needed a permit.

It was understandable, but as I continued looking around the complex, the sun climbed high overhead. I was getting hungry.

Maybe Cliff had miscalculated on getting me a permit. Surely debriefing the pope on *just* the trip back would take hours. He must have only gotten an appointment with the pope yesterday, an exception they made for him because he was family. But me? I was an outsider. Would it put the pope on his guard if his newly returned grandson said he wanted to introduce him to some weirdo?

I'd had a rough night trying to help Zenith, but I hadn't forgotten about Elinalise's request. I wanted to absolutely avoid holding Cliff back.

"Maybe I should have waited a few days first, and then made the appointment myself..."

As I reconsidered my plan, I found that I'd reached the garden.

The Millis Church Headquarters had four gardens. They made up the four triangular corners between the inner diamond and the outer square. Each one was planted with vegetation representing one of the four seasons. It was currently spring, and coincidentally, the springtime garden was the one I walked into. This springtime garden was spilling over with a rainbow of blooming flowers—but the bright, light hues of yellow, white, and pink dominated.

I took it all in as I walked. I used to walk with a plant encyclopedia in one hand as I looked up the names and everything of all the flowers, but I didn't know a thing about the plants in Millishion. Actually, wait, I'd seen that tree with the pink flowers before. Its name was similar to "sakura," like the cherry blossoms, so it stuck out to me. I felt like I'd heard someone say the name recently, but what was it?

"Look, the Sarakh Trees are in bloom!" someone said.

Yeah, Sarakh, that was it. They were trees that grew by the mountains in the northern lands of the Asura Kingdom. They had pink flowers at the tips of their branches that bloomed as spring came in, so they were known as "The Trees That Call Forth Spring" over there. Their lumber had a particular fragrance that made them popular among nobles too. But they grew only in the mountains, so they were expensive. Currently, the Asura royal family oversaw all cultivation of Sarakh Trees, sometimes even exporting them to other nations.

Or, that's what Ariel told me the last time I went to the Asura Kingdom.

"Yes, they're quite beautiful indeed!"

"The Sarakh Blossoms suit you very well, Blessed One!"

"Did you know that these Sarakh Trees were a gift from the Asura Kingdom when the current pope ascended to the throne?"

"Ohoh, Blessed One, how pure you are..."

I heard some voices that made my skin crawl. Out of curiosity, I turned to look toward their skin-crawling sources.

"Come, look, look! It's as though we're in a rain of Sarakh petals!"

"Ah, the sight of the Blessed One standing tall amidst the descending petals... it's almost ethereal."

"How *beautiful!*"

There, I saw an idol and her otaku. The woman wore a frilly, almost princess-like dress as she held her palms upward and spun beneath the gently flitting flower petals. I could almost call her a young girl...except she was probably around twenty years old.

Her face was on the refined beauty side, but also a bit plump. Wendy looked soft despite having dainty arms and legs, but this girl's upper arms and thighs were a little plump. Both were unhealthy, but

where Wendy seemed to lack calories, this woman seemed to lack exercise.

Swarming around this woman was a crowd of men. There were seven of them—a lucky number. Every time the woman said anything, they would agree and breathlessly praise her in this fawning-for-attention kind of way. Yeah, otaku fawning over their idol... Heck, to them she may as well have been a princess. My mind presumably jumped to "otaku" because not one of them was a looker. Those unfortunate faces reminded me of a familiar one I used to see in my mirror. I suppose the blue cuirasses they all had equipped were a bit outside the scope of typical white knights, though.

“Hm?”

Note that while they felt like kindred spirits, I didn’t feel an iota of comfort. I could feel the tension prickling at my neck.

Was this hostility? Well, that shouldn’t have been a surprise. Odds were that those guys were treating her like royalty because she *was* royalty, or at least had some similar status. And those guards probably weren’t just your ordinary nerds. One look at their demeanor and muscles said these were all hardened warriors. They could have been Advanced-tier, if not Saint-tier swordsmen.

That meant they must have noticed me. I came prepared for the worst and wore my Magic Armor Version Two underneath my robes. While I should have seemed unarmed given my lack of a staff, I clearly wasn’t dressed for a picnic. They were, understandably, on their guards.

But still, something was off. This feeling had a dimension of something, I dunno, disconcerting, like a rumbling beneath the surface. It was an unease I found hard to describe...

It was possible that one of those men could have been the Man-God’s disciple. Should I test it out? No, wait, I had to stop and think. Specifically, I had to calculate the chances that saying the word “Man-God” out loud would go horribly, horribly wrong. Substantial. No, I would *not* be saying “Man-God” out loud. But how else could I catch them out...?

“Hm? I don’t believe I’ve seen you around before. Are you here to convert?”

While I was contemplating my strategy, they made the first move.

“Oh...”

The girl looked up at me with an innocent smile. She crossed her arms behind her hips and leaned forward toward me. It was the kind of pose that would make me lose all control if Sylphie used it on me. Roxy would never pose like this. If Eris tried it, she'd look like a snake sizing up her prey; I'd be frozen stiff, prepared to meet my maker.

“What's wrong?”

Ah, right, good question. I had more important things to be thinking about. Um, uh... Well, I wasn't here to convert... I needed to sniff out as to whether they were the Man-God's disciples, so, um...

“S-so you're allll, uh, god...guys?”

It happened in an instant. Three of the otaku whipped out their swords and pointed them at my throat. The remaining four grabbed the idol and pulled her back, hiding her behind them.

There wasn't a trace of that fanboy shit remaining in them. The men now before me had the ferocity of soldiers on a battlefield. Their sunken pupils bored down into the shining whites of their eyes.

Crap, these dudes were *serious*. I was sweating. I should not have started this conversation. Oh, wait. I hadn't.

“There *is* a God.”

“Saint Millis is the one true God.”

“For what purpose would you ask something so obvious?”

“Could it be that you *don't* believe in Saint Millis?”

“You don't believe in God?”

“A...traitor?”

“A heathen!”

The otaku interrogated me without my input as their eyes grew darker. Oh no, this was turning into a witch trial!

“S-sorry... I was, uh, thinking about something and that came out wrong. Please forgive me.”

This situation called for an honest apology. They were right; this was the headquarters of the Millis Church. Everyone here surely believed in only one god, Saint Millis. There was no worse place to ask something like that. I understand, I came off as cynical; suspicious and

therefore suspect. *Please, find it in your hearts to forgive me.*

“Grave, what do we do?”

“Dust, you give the call.”

“All right, we’ll kill him. He’s probably a heathen. He seems unusually calm too... And even if he is a believer, putting such bizarre thoughts into our Blessed One’s head is a crime in itself.”

“Got it, we’ll kill him. Good idea.”

Wow, decided already, huh. They worked together like an oiled machine. I’d probably hesitate if I were in their shoes.

“Whoa, whoa, wait a second! Let’s all calm down, maybe let me explain myself—”

It’d make Cliff look bad if a fight broke out here, and I certainly didn’t want to ruin such a beautiful garden. Who would want to see those lovely Sarakh Trees torn out by the root? There was nothing in it for either of us, so let’s talk about it, no?

My thoughts were leaning toward peace, but my attitude had already switched. I’d had my Demon Eye of Foresight open since the moment they pointed their blades at me, and was pouring mana into my Magic Armor. I wanted to avoid violence, but if an apology wouldn’t cut it, then I wasn’t going to hold back.

After yesterday, they caught me in a *bad* mood.

“So... You really intend to come at me?” I asked.

Something about my question made them shudder and open their eyes wide. My Demon Eye of Foresight showed them tensing up, pouring their strength into their arms and legs.

Here they came.

“Halt!”

A commanding voice cut through the air. One that sounded just a bit familiar. Its authority cut the tension instantly, and that tension vanished from the other guys’ bodies.

“What are you doing?!”

Approaching us was a lone female knight. She looked in her mid-thirties and wore the same blue cuirass as the otaku. Her calm, refined face was stern. I knew that face very well.

“Captain. This heathen was attempting to harm the Blessed One,” one of the nerds promptly reported. *C’mon, man, don’t lie!*

“I’m being falsely accused. I was simply looking at the Sarakh—”

“Silence, you,” one of the men said in a low voice, his sword still pointed at me. Heck no, I wasn’t staying silent. My life was in danger here.

“A heathen?” the female knight said as she finally looked at my face. “Ah!”

And then, she realized who I was. Her face warmed up into a smile.

“Rudeus! My li’l Rudeus, is that you? Wow, it’s been so *long!*”

Then, she shot a look at the men who had their swords drawn and raised her voice.

“Stay your blades! This man is my nephew!”

After watching the otaku startle with surprise and sheathe their swords, I closed my Demon Eye of Foresight.

Therese Latria. Zenith’s younger sister, and therefore my aunt. She helped me a lot back when I was taking that ship from the Millis Continent to the Central Continent.

Therese appeared to be the leader of these swordsmen; at her order, the otaku stowed their blades in the blink of an eye and even offered an apology just in case. Reluctantly, of course. I apologized for my own slip of the tongue, but their open hostility toward me didn’t change; that wasn’t enough for them. They continued keeping their idol a safe distance away from me and remained fiercely vigilant.

“Do you remember me? Or did you forget since we only saw each other once?”

“Of course I remember. You were a lifesaver in getting us that ship.”

Well, I could ignore those guys for now. I talked with Therese instead. Ah, seeing her really took me back.

“I heard you showed up at the family home, but I didn’t think you’d come to the church headquarters, too. Ah, did you come all this way to see li’l ol’ me?”

“No, an acquaintance was going to introduce me to a head of the Church... I see you made your way back here, Therese.”

If I recall, the last time I saw her, I'd heard that she'd been demoted to the western port city. Ten years had passed since then; it wasn't much surprise that she'd worked her way back.

“Ah, well, some stuff happened,” Therese chuckled with a shrug. I guess she had some circumstances that were a bit hard to talk about. I wouldn't pry. There was something else I wanted to know, however.

“So, I take it that you were informed about my visit to the family home?”

“Yeah, sounds like you had a spat with Mother.”

“Spat... Is that what you'd call it? A spat?”

“I heard Mother got you pissed off. I know how she is. She probably told you to do this and do that, right?”

“That's right! Listen to this!”

It was my first time meeting my aunt in a long time. The thought crossed my mind that I didn't know if she was on my side, but I couldn't stop my mouth from running. Before I realized it, I'd told her every possible detail about what had happened yesterday. Looks like I still had plenty of anger pent up. Or maybe it just put me at ease to see a real, present smile on a face that was so similar to Zenith's.

“Does that sort of thing fly in this country?”

“No, even this country has its limits... Even for Mother, that's just... I think there had to have been some misunderstanding? Still, hmm... Rudeus, are you sure you didn't say anything that might have made Mother angry? If someone picks a fight, she can argue them into the ground...”

“I wonder that myself. I was trying to avoid saying anything upsetting, so I put up with a lot of what she said.”

“Hmm...” Therese crossed her arms sternly and grumbled under her breath as she thought.

It hadn't felt like she picked a fight yesterday. To me, it seemed that was her plan from the start.

“Well, I'll ask about the details the next time I'm at the family home. Mother can be stubborn, overbearing, and bossy, but she's not an

evil person at heart. I'll bet there was some misunderstanding."

"..."

Therese reached her conclusion in seconds. Even if there *were* some misunderstanding, I knew how angry I got. I didn't want to ask her to help patch things up. It'd been a long time since someone made me cut them off entirely. But, if—*if*—there really *was* a misunderstanding, and if she apologized in good faith, I'd apologize for wrecking the house.

"Wow, though, Rudeus! You've gotten so big! Ah, wait, you're not supposed tell a man he's getting big... You're about twenty by now, right?"

Therese was considerate enough to change the subject. I sure didn't want to talk about Claire all day, either.

"Yes, I'm about twenty-two years old."

"Really now! Guess that was a whole ten years ago, huh... Ah, that reminds me, what about Miss Eris? Is she doing all right? I remember her being a handful back in the day!"

Therese got as excited as a child. Where'd that refined look go? Her expression when she got serious almost reminded me of Grandma Claire... Ugh, oh no, I don't wanna think about that.

"Eris is doing well. She gave birth to her first child this past year."

"Child... Ah, I see, you two got married! Congratulations!"

"Thank you very much."

"Is she here as well?"

"No, she's staying home in Sharia. Someone has to take care of the baby, after all."

"I see, I see. Well, there might be some bumps on the road of life, but I'm sure you two can work together to make it over them!"

Just two? Oh... Right. She was a follower of Millis, wasn't she? I'd need to clarify that I was married to three women. Oh well, I decided to keep silent for now. Didn't want to upset her now that we finally had a happy moment between us.

"Yeah, so, marriage, huh... To think my little Rudeus and Miss Eris grew up and got married... *Sigh*..."

Or, so I'd thought, but Therese looked like her soul was leaving her body. I guess marriage was a sensitive topic for her. Given her reaction, I had to assume that she was still single. That, or divorced. Uhh, how old was she, again? Zenith was around thirty-eight, and Therese was younger, so...yeah thirty-five-ish. When you considered that adulthood in this world started at fifteen, and that most people got married between then and the age of twenty... Uhhhh...

"So, how's *work*?"

Let's change the subject.

"Hm? Oh! Well, some stuff happened since we last saw each other, but I'm back to protecting the Blessed Child. I'm even leading these guys!"

At Therese's mention, I glanced back at her group. Of the seven knights, only two were still cautious of me, while the rest had turned back into the e-girl's entourage. It looked like the problems of the world floated away easily for them.

"Quite the intimidating bunch."

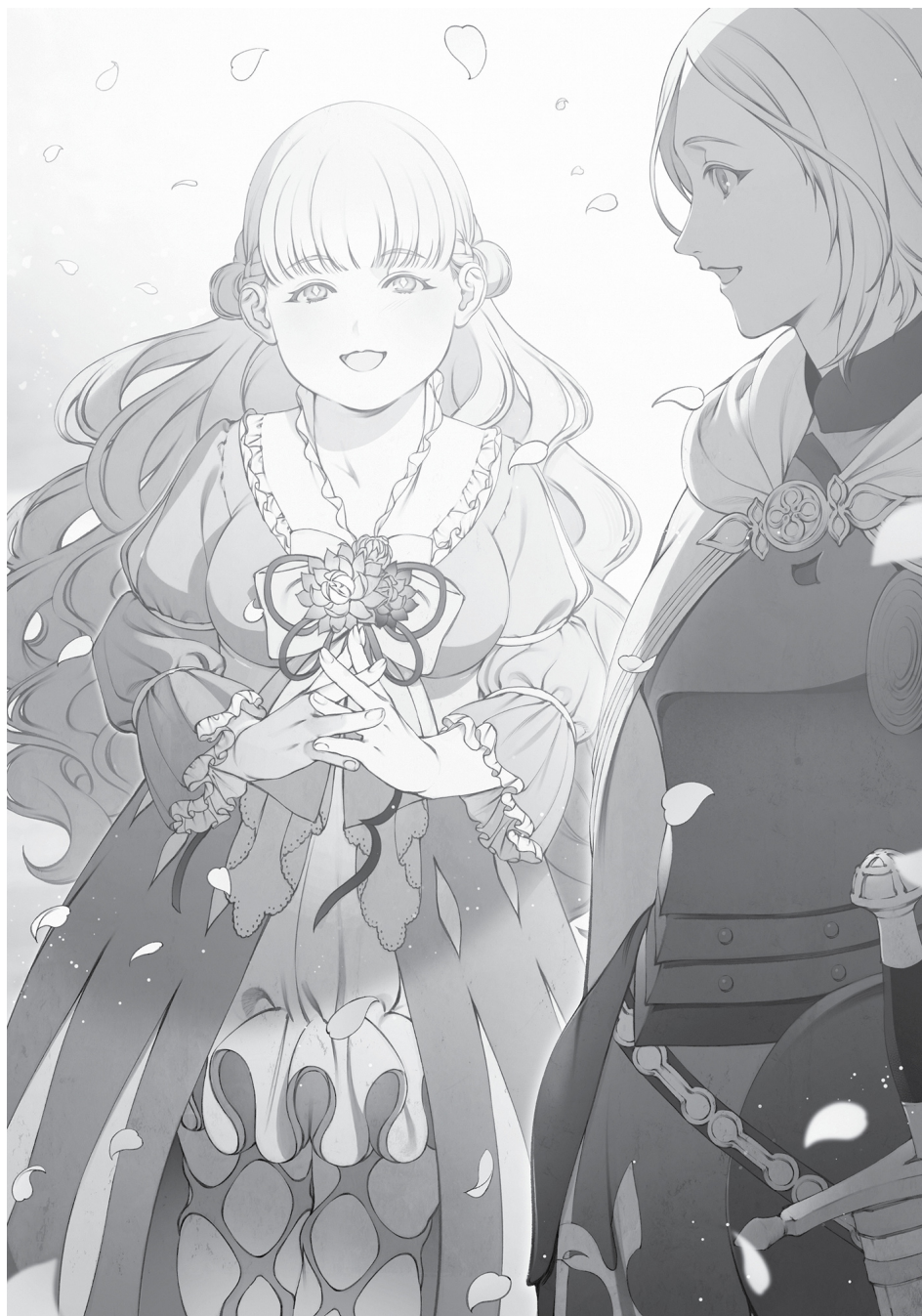
"Yeah... Ever since that attempted assassination, only the strongest of the Temple Knights' warriors have been assigned to guard her. Which means you met the guys who are a little...much."

Therese had previously described the Temple Knights as "a bunch of fanatics." Perhaps that was what her use of "much" referred to. They *did* jump straight to lethal force after my slip of the tongue, after all. They were as fast as Orsted when I first met him.

"Well, they might be a little attached to the scripture, but they're not a bad bunch."

Whew, scary. I could understand believing in God, but you couldn't believe it to the point that you got tunnel vision. Wasn't your God supposed to be forgiving?

Just then, a voice suddenly came from behind. "Pardon, Therese? May I join in on your conversation?"



The idol that the knights were fanboying over was peering at us. Her entourage was right behind her, ready to draw their blades at a moment's notice.

"I believe I heard you say the name 'Eris.' Might you be an acquaintance of a certain red-haired Miss Eris? The swordswoman?"

So this was the Blessed Child, huh? People kept calling her "Blessed" this, "Blessed" that, chirping it over and over like little pocket critters, but I didn't know her real name. She sounded pretty joyful, so maybe "Nurse"? I could ask... No, I should introduce myself first. Claire called me "tawdry" after I introduced myself first, but doing so was simply a warrior's etiquette.

"My apologies. I am Rudeus Greyrat, a servant of the Dragon God Orsted. Sword King Eris Greyrat is my wife."

Dragon God and Sword King. Those two terms instantly put her entourage on even greater alert. The fact that they reacted to "Dragon God" made me think there had to be a disciple here... But then again, it was all seven who reacted, so who could say?

"Oh my! So you are! I owe a great deal to Miss Eris, as she saved my life ten years ago!"

Ten years ago, meaning when I came to Millishion. I think I remembered her telling me about it. She said she went out to hunt goblins but came back having disposed of some assassins.

"Is Miss Eris visiting here as well?"

"No, I'm afraid that she had to stay home to take care of our child."

"How unfortunate."

When the idol looked sad, all of her otaku sympathetically lowered their brows. It was kinda adorable. These guys were all in on their fave girl.

Wait, I introduced myself, but I didn't get a name in response. Was I supposed to say "Blessed One" too?

"But if so, that would mean that by extension...it was the Dragon God Orsted who saved me, no?"

"Huh?"

He didn't have anything to do with it. Eris and I didn't even know

Orsted's name at the time. Then again, I was Orsted's subordinate now, and Eris accepted that and even offered aid. You could *sort of* make the argument that Eris was therefore Orsted's subordinate...which would mean Orsted saved her, I suppose?

Nah, I didn't want to bother with a lie that'd get found out so quickly.

"No, neither I nor Eris had any connection to Orsted at the time. But if you feel any desire to repay a debt, Blessed One, then I would be much obliged if you were to refrain from holding any hostility toward Orsted in the future."

"Hm? Should I have hostility toward someone I've never met?"

"Orsted possesses a curse with that effect."

When I said that, the idol looked deep into my eyes. Seated within her rotund face was a pair of deep, rounded pupils. The colors of her eyes didn't seem different; it didn't look like she had a Demon Eye.

But I felt it. Something was being done to me. What that something was, I wasn't sure. There was nothing binding my body, and nothing stealing my breath. All I could tell was that something was being *done* to me, nothing more.

"Hm... It seems you've been truthful."

After a moment, the idol nodded.

"You can tell?"

"I can, yes."

I looked to Therese and the entourage, but none of them seemed to find this strange. Meaning...this was her power as a Blessed Child. The power that compared to Zanoba's monstrous strength and stamina. The power to simply look in one's eyes and know if they were telling a lie. Or, was it to read the other person's mind? Perhaps it was something else entirely.

"Is...that your power?"

"Yes, that's correct."

I would have loved to ask the details, but her entourage was still eyeing me. It was probably safer to leave it unsaid. But should I? Orsted never said a thing about this Blessed Child.

"Wow, that's...something..."

Crap. I think I might have been too obvious about my ambivalence the moment I realized that something had been done to me. There was nothing I could ask that wouldn't drive the entourage to attack. But it felt like I was missing a trick if I didn't learn something here. There was no guarantee that we'd meet again. To ask, or not to ask?

"Hngh... Phew..."

First, a deep breath.

"Blessed Child. May I ask you a question that I'm aware will seem quite rude?"

Next, get permission before asking. It was important to take these things one step at a time. Once I had that, I would ask one simple question that wouldn't reveal what I was searching for.

"Yes, by all means."

"Have you had any dreams lately in which someone who claims to be a god offers you a prophecy?"

"No. Not lately, and in fact, not once. And I'm certain I never will."

The idol spoke in no uncertain terms. She looked me in the eyes, listened, and said that neither her past nor future contained such a dream. She seemed to *know*. Was this another effect of her power? Perhaps it was a power that could refuse to ever meet with the Man-God. Maybe she really could read minds? The Man-God surely had many more dodgy hidden secrets than I did.

"Thank you very much."

The tension lifted from my shoulders. For now, I knew she wasn't an enemy, and that was enough. The Blessed Child might have lied to me just now, but I would choose to believe her.

"Now then, it's *my* turn to ask *you*!" the Blessed Child said giddily.

"Gah! Yes, ask away."

What else could she ask? If she could read my mind, then would there be any need to ask at all? It looked like her power wasn't active at all times. She had to look someone in the eyes and do something to activate it. If she didn't look at my eyes...then maybe I was safe?

"Please, tell me about Miss Eris!"

“Oh... Sure.”

That was all? Well, hey, if she wasn't an enemy, and if she had no relation to the Man-God, then I suppose I could trust her.

Perhaps I'd include some shilling for our wonderful CEO, Orsted. Worry not, our company insurance covered preexisting blessings. With an eighty-year history of reliable service, you could rest easy that that our top-of-the-line staff would provide you with all the help you'd need. And our company is always recruiting associates with a can-do attitude to join our team.

Hmm, was it overreaching to scout the Blessed Child while I was planning to persuade the pope to back us? I think the Blessed Child and the pope belonged to different factions...

“Rudeus! Rudeus, are you here?”

As I was thinking up my future job board posting, I heard a voice calling for me from far off. It was Cliff's; it seemed like he'd finally gotten the permit.

“My apologies, Blessed Child, but it seems my time has come.”

“What?! Oh, what a shame...”

The idol furrowed her brow. Her entourage furrowed their brows in unison as I felt their aggro energy rise.

How interesting. Fascinating, even. I definitely wanted to keep this conversation going. But first, the person I kept waiting took priority.

“I'm sure I'll be in this town for some time to come, so we can save talking about Eris for later.”

“It's a promise!”

I bid farewell to the idol and made one last request to Therese.

“Also, Therese. If you go to the family home, I'd like you to tell Claire that I'll be responsible for looking after my mom, so she's free to mind her business... Also, if she wants a return on her contributions to the Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad, tell her that I'll gladly front the money. Any price she names.”

“Got it. I'll tell her.”

“Thank you.”

After I bid farewell to Therese, I gave a nod to the entourage and left them behind.

The Blessed Child, huh? At a glance, she struck me as a sheltered pick-me or a shallow princess with an entourage of white knights, but I felt some unfathomable depth in her. She told me, clearly, she wasn't my enemy, but I got the sense that she knew who the Man-God was. I should be on my guard. Wait, I forgot to ask her name...

Those were the thoughts running through my mind as I made my way toward Cliff to obtain my permit.

Chapter 10: The Pope, and...

BEFORE I ENTERED the inner sanctum, I had to undergo a body search to confiscate anything that could possibly serve as a weapon. I had to give up everything from my trusty knife to my scrolls.

“We’ll hold on to your belongings.”

They didn’t seem to view my armor as a weapon because they didn’t ask me to take it off. Cliff certainly knew, but the fact that he didn’t say anything was probably a sign of his trust in me. So as a show of equal good faith, I gave up my two gauntlets as well; my left that was loaded with a stone of absorption, and my right that could fire a shotgun blast.

The central area was a maze of halls. No straightaways in sight, all labyrinthine twists and turns. The flat white walls obscured where the turns where and where they might take you. Ah, but this was the heart of the Millis Church, after all. It was surely built against possibility of enemy invasion, just like a castle would be.

Cliff glided smoothly through it all, eventually bringing me to the pope’s office. The office was guarded by two knights and a barrier.

“Just to clarify, you won’t be able to use magic in here.”

“Got it.”

The barrier’s strength was probably Saint-tier or King-tier. These knights also looked about that rank. And if a fight somehow broke out, it’d be all of that versus just me and my fists.

“Your Holiness, I’ve brought your visitor.”

Beyond the transparent barrier was Cliff’s grandfather, Harry Grimor. He looked like just the gentle old man that I imagined he’d be from his letter. He had a long, white beard and wore vestments embroidered with gold.

“Yes, I appreciate it.”

There was no sense of Sauros’s force or Reida’s incisiveness. I couldn’t feel an air of strength; instead, I felt the great presence of a

magnanimous heart. It was like instant recognition, “Oh. The pope. Of course.” I felt no aura, I just felt warm.

It was hard to explain it.

“Allow me to introduce you. This is Rudeus Greyrat. He’s an underclassman of mine from the Ranoa University of Magic. He’s an incredibly brilliant man, with an aptitude for magic that exceeds even my own. As our friendship is one that I intend to maintain, it seemed prudent to present him to you.”

The pope nodded along to Cliff’s introduction with a placid look on his face. It seemed like any further explanation would have to come from my own mouth. As Cliff and I discussed last night, all he was doing was introducing a friend to a family member; beyond that, any agenda I had with the pope would require me to take the first step.

“I see. Now, then... I take it that Mr. Rudeus has come to request something of me? Perhaps permission to set up his mercenary band? Maybe permission to sell the Superd figurines? Or could it be an invitation to join the Dragon God Orsted’s forces?”

Or, not. Sounds like good ol’ Cliff preempted me a little. Filled him in on my goals, positions, and reasons for coming to this country. Well, I’d get to all of it eventually. If anything, not needing to start from scratch was a serious time-saver...

Huh? Cliff was looking back and forth between me and the pope with his eyes widened in surprise.

“I see the Right Hand of the Dragon God is not easily rattled. Not even a twitch of the eyebrow... You should take notes, Cliff.”

The pope’s first impression of me hardened irrevocably before my soft little brain even caught up to what was going on. It was too late. The pope mistook me for a badass.

“Apologies. I did some research beforehand.”

The pope began reading off of a nearby document with a light smile.

“Rudeus Greyrat. Blood relative to the distinguished house of Notos Greyrat. Son of Paul Greyrat and pupil to Sword King Ghislaine Dedoldia. You were caught in the Displacement Incident, but in a mere three years you managed to return to your homeland on your own strength. Shortly after, you enrolled in the Ranoa University of Magic

and befriended Princess Ariel. Years later, you battled against the Dragon God Orsted and surrendered to him. You worked behind the scenes during the turmoil in the Asura Kingdom to defeat both Water God Reida and North Emperor Auber. You pushed for Ariel Anemoi Asura to assume her current position as ruler. After that, you worked to expand your private army into lands around the world while persuading those in power to cooperate with the Dragon God Orsted... Am I missing anything?"

Not bad. But nothing obscure; it's not like I did any of that in secret. It was all out there to find if someone wanted to. Besides, the pope himself can have no secrets. His biography is picked apart by thousands. Research like this merely levelled the playing field.

That said, it wasn't all correct.

"There are three mistakes. By no means did I return from the Demon Continent on my strength alone. I had the help of a Superd warrior by the name of Ruijerd. I was not the man who defeated the Water God Reida; it was the Dragon God Orsted. Likewise, Auber was defeated by the combined efforts of Sword King Ghislaine and Sword King Eris. Last, and by far most important, I would like to add that I am in fact pupil to King-tier Water Magician Roxy Migurdia."

"Oh my, an honest one, I see."

The pope nodded to himself and wrote something down on a nearby sheet of paper. I didn't know what he wrote, but I really did hope that he added the part about me being Roxy's pupil.

"So, does that mean your reason for selling these Superd figurines is to repay your debt to their race? You're not plotting to overthrow the government by increasing literacy rates?"

"That's right."

"Well, now."

What did raising literacy rates have to do with overthrowing a government... I guess it was the same logic as a butterfly causing a tornado with the flap of its wings.

"Then may I ask, why do you solicit people to cooperate with Orsted?"

"So that the world can be prepared to fight back against the Demon King Laplace when he resurrects in about eighty years."

The pope didn't bat an eye at that answer. He just nodded understandingly.

"I see. So, you took advantage of Cliff to reach me here and request my cooperation, no? 'If you wish for the Dragon God to save your forces, you'll do as I say.' Is that right?"

"No, that's not correct."

I got the feeling that this old guy had already slipped into negotiation mode. Well, fine by me; we were going to negotiate eventually. But I had to be clear where I stood.

"The ally I *really* want is Cliff."

"Well, now. Should I expect that you'll be supporting Cliff from the shadows?"

"No... True, that was my intention at first, but Cliff told me that he wanted to test how far his own strength alone could take him, so I decided against it. If nothing else, I'll be entirely hands-off until he establishes his own power within the church."

The pope broke out into a smile when he heard that. It was the face of an old man who'd just learned that his grandson scored a hundred points on a test.

"I see, so Cliff really told you that..."

"He did. So please, treat me like I'm just a humble servant of the Dragon God for today."

I told him the truth. He'd already investigated me; while there were some holes in his intel, he'd gotten the gist. Who knew what else he'd dug up, so better not to lie and get caught. Maybe fools favored honesty, but it's a likable kind of foolish.

"I have two requests. I'd like assistance with the creation of a mercenary band, and I'd like permission to sell the Superd figurines."

The matter with House of Latria could wait for now. That was personal. Anyway, having some connections would incidentally strengthen my position there.

"Hmm."

The pope looked at me as a smile subtly spread across his face. It was like a poker face; he might have had a smile, but his expression betrayed nothing.

“You know, human connections, once established, can never truly be severed. No matter how hard some may try,” the pope stated, his smile staying constant.

I wondered if that was a word of warning. Perhaps to me, for making my request as someone cut off from Cliff. Or perhaps to Cliff, who wanted to cut me off to test his own strength.

“So, in light of your connection with Cliff...I will assist you with your mercenary band.”

Just like that, I had my wish. I had my doubts as to why he didn't seem to ask anything in return, but it only took a moment of thought to get there. The “in light of your connection with Cliff” part was his return. And eventually, once Cliff got big enough, I'd be an asset to him and the papalists. To the pope, this was an angel investment.

“However, permission for the Superd figurines will prove difficult.”

“Why is that?”

“I have a position as both the pope and as the leading figure of the Demon Integrationists. However, the cardinalists who espouse the expulsion of demons have expanded their influence as of late. Currently, I simply don't have the leverage to grant permission to sell these Superd figurines on my own. And since the next pope will surely be chosen from among the cardinalists... You understand, no?”

The pope then gave me a look. As though he was implicitly telling me I needed to crush the Demon Expulsionists to get what I wanted.

But would I, now? I wasn't opposed to being an agent of the pope. I disavowed the House of Latria after a fight, so I was already well on my way to being their enemy. Very sorry, Therese, but I'd crush the expulsionists or anyone else who crossed my path.

Hang on. Wouldn't that count as helping Cliff? It was a gray area. Cliff needed enemies to push himself to overcome. What if those were also my enemies? Should I hold back? But wait; if I became an asset for the Millis Church, wouldn't that count as an accomplishment for Cliff? Was any of this right at all? Hmm...

“To be clear...I have your support with the mercenary band, correct?”

“You do.”

“Then for today, I’ll be happy to accept your deal regarding the mercenary band.”

Everything else could wait—it didn’t all need solving in one day. Besides, selling the Superd figurines wasn’t a part of my scope for this meeting to begin with. If I had the pope’s support in building the mercenary band, then it was best to quit while I was ahead.

“I see. That’s a shame, then.”

The pope’s smile remained firm as he concluded the meeting.

Cliff had other business to attend to, so I left the headquarters alone.

“Phew...”

I let out a huge sigh the moment I got out. I was exhausted... First the Blessed Child, then the pope. Sparring against two exceptional people in one day. Both had some wild eccentricities, and each belonged to opposing factions to boot.

The pope, a Demon Integrationist. The Blessed Child, protected by the cardinalists who pushed for demon expulsion. If I were asked to pick a side, then there was no question that I’d join the integrationists, the pope’s side. That’d square me off against the Temple Knights, who were aligned with the Demon Expulsionists. Also in those ranks: the House of Latria, and by extension Therese.

Therese had saved my hide twice now. I despised the rest of the Latrias, but I couldn’t disregard my debt to her. Plus, the Blessed Child didn’t seem like a bad person. I guess you could count that entourage against her—but let’s not. It’d be wise to postpone taking sides as long as possible... And I wish I were the perfect wise man who could’ve pulled that off. So much for my plans and ideals.

Anyway, arranging to bump into the Blessed Child a few more times seemed like a fine idea. I wanted to get a better idea of what her ability was. Maybe see if she were a disciple of the Man-God...which, to be honest, would be impossible to find out.

Hypothetically, if she were a disciple, that would complicate my

mission here in ways I couldn't prepare for or foresee. In the Asura Kingdom, the Man-God hadn't interfered with my work building the mercenary band. So was my work posing a threat to the Man-God, or wasn't it? If he stepped in, that'd be a clue at least. But I had no way of knowing, and overthinking it would just run me in circles. I had to think what I was doing mattered, and he hadn't interfered in my past work against him. So, I would act on the assumption that he wouldn't interfere here. I'd reserve my search for disciples for when I did face interference, or for when I felt that something was truly wrong.

At the moment, there was no shortage of suspicious players in this game. The Blessed Child; Claire; the pope. But winding myself into paranoid knots had been my downfall in the past. I could head that off by building the Mercenary Band branch quickly, setting up the contact tablet, and getting ahold of Orsted at once.

Yep. For now, today's meeting had gotten me the support of the pope. That was my starting point. I'd scout out potential buildings for the Mercenary Band, then purchase one. There, I would set up the contact tablet and the emergency teleportation circle. After all that I'd finally have my business call with Orsted.

"All right. First order of business: choose a building."

Next move, locked in. I could let Aisha handle the details. There were plenty of questions to account for, such as which district our location should be and which merchant we should do business with. Knowing Aisha, her mind was already working on the problem. It was such a relief to have a reliable partner.

The problem was Zenith. If Aisha left her behind to tour the city, she'd have nobody looking after her. Asking Wendy to do so was an option...but hey, this really needed to be a group decision. I ought to head home and discuss it with the others.

I took a horse-drawn carriage across the city and returned to Cliff's residence in the Divine District.

The sun was setting. I was getting hungry, so I was looking forward to dinner. And ugh, the food! It was so nice to have fresh eggs

here. Boiled eggs, fried eggs, omelets... We also had some bread, so I could probably make pork cutlets, too. Ah, the presence of a single egg opens the door to new worlds of culinary delights. New horizons of joy to explore in every meal, with every egg!

Thank goodness I brought Aisha so someone knew how to cook one.

“I’m *hooome*! And boy, am I hungry!”

“What do you *mean* she’s still not back?!”

The moment I returned, I heard Aisha shouting with fury. I hurried inside the house to find my little sister cornering Wendy.

“Why did you let her leave the house?!”

“B-but, he said it was fine...”

“Why would you believe something a stranger told you?! You heard what we were talking about last night, didn’t you?! Why wouldn’t you tell someone about what was going on?! What made you think she couldn’t have held off until tomorrow?! If you could’ve waited for a few minutes, I would’ve gotten back in time! You could’ve asked my brother too!”

“I-I mean, I *heard* what you talked about, but, well, I didn’t really understand it, and that person said it was fine...”

“Is that *all* you have to say for yourself?! I’m telling you that no, it was *not* fine! Wait, don’t tell me, did you come to sabotage us?!”

Aisha lifted her shoulder and raised a fist as Wendy cowered in fear.

Rare to see Aisha get angry enough to shout. That was as deeply as I thought through the situation as I walked up behind my sister and held back her raised fist.

“Aisha, calm down a little.”

“Shut it!”

She swatted me away. But at least now Aisha noticed that I was there.

“Ah, Big Brother... I’m sorry...”

Aisha clutched the arm she swatted at me with and hung her head.

“What happened?”

I should start by asking for the details. If there was a fight, I assumed they were both a little bit in the wrong. But Aisha kept her pale face lowered. She wasn't answering. This wasn't like her—she wasn't shy about sharing her opinions.

“Umm...”

Seemingly unable to bear the silence, Wendy tried to fill it. “Well, this afternoon, a person named Geese came by—”

“Geese came here?”

“He said he felt bad for Zenith since she was cooped up inside after finally coming home, so he took her outside...”

So here's what Aisha was reacting to.

“And they haven't come back...”

All the blood drained out of my head in an instant. I took a deep breath.

“Aisha, I need you to explain everything—*calmly*. From the beginning. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah...”

Aisha started talking.

That afternoon, Geese came to Cliff's house. He introduced himself as Zenith's friend coming to check up on her. Aisha didn't see him for herself, but after hearing Wendy describe his appearance, speech mannerisms, stature, equipment, and what he talked about, she seemed pretty certain that it was Geese.

Aisha had to ask what'd happened because she wasn't there.

“Where were you, Aisha?”

“I figured we'd need a bunch of stuff to live here, so I went shopping... Wendy can't read, and she probably wouldn't know what we needed, so I did it... I'm sorry.”

“Oh, no, it's fine.”

Aisha had a lapse in judgment, and during that lapse, something that we could never have predicted occurred. These things do happen. People mess up. It's fine. Geese chatted with Wendy and Zenith for a while.

And then, Geese said, “I feel bad for Zenith, all cooped up inside after finally comin’ home. I’ll take her around to see the sights.”

And Wendy allowed it. Part of me was so dumbfounded by this that I wanted to clutch my head and scream. She’d been there when we talked last night. Hadn’t she heard?

But I couldn’t pin it all on Wendy. She didn’t see how awful the Latrias were for herself; she only had secondhand knowledge. It made sense that she didn’t understand that they were dangerous. Besides, Geese had a way with words; if he had nothing else going for him, he could talk anybody into anything. I’d been planning to show Zenith the town myself too, so I could hardly blame Wendy for letting her guard down and thinking that maybe an hour’s outing with a friend would be all right.

“I ran out right away to search for them, but I couldn’t find anything...”

The moment Aisha returned from shopping and heard about what happened, she leapt out the door and searched everywhere...to no avail. Even as the afternoon turned into dusk, not a trace. Even when she returned home in the vain hope that they might have showed up while she was out, they hadn’t come back. With no idea left of what to do, Aisha took her frustration out on Wendy...which was the point at which I arrived.

“What do we do, Big Brother? I was the one who said we’d be safe here... It’s all my fault, isn’t it? What do we do... What do we do?!”

Aisha was losing it in a way I’d rarely seen from her; she was almost in tears. The first order of business was getting her to settle down.

“Calm down. It’s Geese we’re talking about. He probably just forgot about what he promised and took her all over the city.”

“But, right now, we don’t have any clue where Mother Zenith is!”

“Look, just calm down.”

Part of me was getting anxious too. But this was Geese she was with—he might have had the combat prowess of a wet puppy, but he was a sharp, trustworthy guy. Out of all the people who could have potentially whisked Zenith away, I felt a little more at ease it was him. By the same token, this was *Geese*. He probably got distracted, went

chasing after something silly, and then lost track of time. Any minute now, and he could pop in through that door and say with a chuckle, "Ah, sorry, brah, I ran into an ol' buddy and just had to catch up."

"For now, let's wait a bit longer for them to come back."

That was my decision.

Time passed. The sun set. Eventually, Cliff returned from work, exhaustion on his face.

Zenith and Geese, however, stayed gone.

I...wouldn't say that time was wasted. In those hours, Aisha and I were able to calm down. I think.

"I'm sorry... But please, don't take it out on Wendy. She didn't mean to do anything bad, I don't think..."

Cliff gave Wendy a scolding, firm but fair, and he made sure she knew that he was still on her side. He probably didn't anticipate that anything like this could happen, either. He originally hired her for light housework. And given that she'd reached her age without getting either employment or a foster family, Cliff had to have known that she wasn't going to be the sharpest knife in the drawer.

But it wasn't right to berate someone over their shortcomings. Don't cry over their spilled milk; clean it up instead.

"I'm going out to look. Cliff, stay on alert in case we miss each other."

"S-sure..."

It was around dinnertime when I decided to go out in search of her.

Maybe I took too long to decide. But if you'll allow me to make an excuse, I promise I would have thrown myself out the door in an instant if I knew that Zenith was on her own.

However, she'd gone with Geese; if Wendy's story was true, then Zenith should still be with him. The chimp might have been too cowardly to handle a fight, but any other challenge he faced would be

no problem for him. Be it gathering intel, mapping, shopping, cooking, maintenance, or even giving health checkups for his party members, he was an all-around star player. So for whatever reason, I got the idea that Zenith would be all right.

But when I thought about it, I realized that his uselessness in battle was indeed a fatal flaw. If he had to fight, he wouldn't be able to protect Zenith. Geese had developed a knack for avoiding danger to make up for it, but something could still go very wrong. Zenith could space out and step on the foot of a tough-looking old dude. There were even women who wouldn't hesitate to throw a punch just for looking at 'em funny.

And Geese was a demon. What would the House of Latria think if they happened to spot Geese and Zenith alone together? They'd say that I wouldn't let her stay in her own home, but here she was, out alone with a demon. They might decide to attack and take Zenith back by force.

Or wait. Maybe the Latrias were behind this. Knowing their resources, the Geese that came earlier could have been an impostor. They could have caught someone with similar appearance, build, and speech mannerisms, and then had him pose as Geese to talk Wendy into giving up Zenith...maybe. Not that he'd be easy to imitate.

Last, and maybe I was paranoid for even considering it, there was the possibility that Geese was the Man-God's disciple. Why *was* he here when he hated the Holy Country so much, anyway?

“...”

I refitted my robe and magic armor and left the house.

Aisha followed my lead like it was the most natural thing in the world. “Where do we go first? Do we split up?”

She must have been anxious over Zenith's disappearance. If she was, it was all the more vital that I stayed calm.

“No, I can't risk you getting kidnapped. We'll go together.”

“O-okay. Got it...”

Aisha's breath hitched at the word “kidnapped.” She had to have considered the possibility. There were plenty of kidnappers in this world, after all...

It wasn't all that likely, though. Maybe not if she'd been stumbling

around alone, but she was with Geese. Beating the crap out of Geese to make Zenith a slave was a lot of work. If I were in their shoes, I'd find a different, more defenseless target.

“...”

After a few steps, I suddenly stopped. Where was I supposed to look first, again? Shit, I was slipping; guess I hadn't fully calmed down. People didn't calm down just by telling themselves to. They needed deep breaths.

“Huff... Phew...”

There was someone smarter than me right next to me. I had to talk to her.

“Aisha... Where do you think Geese is?”

“Um... Maybe in the Adventurers' District?”

“Your reasoning?”

“Geese said before that he couldn't enter the Divine District, and I don't think he'd go to the Residential District when so many followers of Millis live there. If it's between the Adventurers' District and the Commerce District... Well, Geese is an adventurer, so I think there's a higher chance he'd be in the Adventurers' District.”

“All right. Let's roll.”

Knew I could count on Aisha, she was a quick thinker. We had no time to waste.

“Let's hurry,” I said.

“Okay... Oh, right. Should we use a horse? We still have one from the carriage, right?”

“Hm?”

A horse... I still wasn't able to ride them. I mean, I had the basics. I'd done some practice, and I knew how to handle a carriage. But I was far from skilled enough to ride wherever I pleased in an emergency situation. But Aisha had nothing to worry about. When I really needed to, I could move as fast as any horse.

“We don't need one.”

“Huh?”

I princess-carried Aisha in my arms and gathered mana into my

magic armor. Legs, green light. All systems go. I'd practiced neutralizing the landing impact plenty of times.

"Aisha, hold on tight."

"Huh...? Ah!"

Aisha's body tensed up as she clung tightly to my robe. I made sure to hold her so that she was locked in place.

"N-no! No! Stop!"

I'm sure she said some other things, but I ignored them. Zenith was missing. This, of all things, was no coincidence. Maybe Geese did it, or maybe it was the handiwork of the Latrias. Perhaps the papalists had a shadowy hidden agenda. Maybe we'd gotten wrapped up in the designs of the Blessed Child...

Or maybe this was the work of the Man-God.

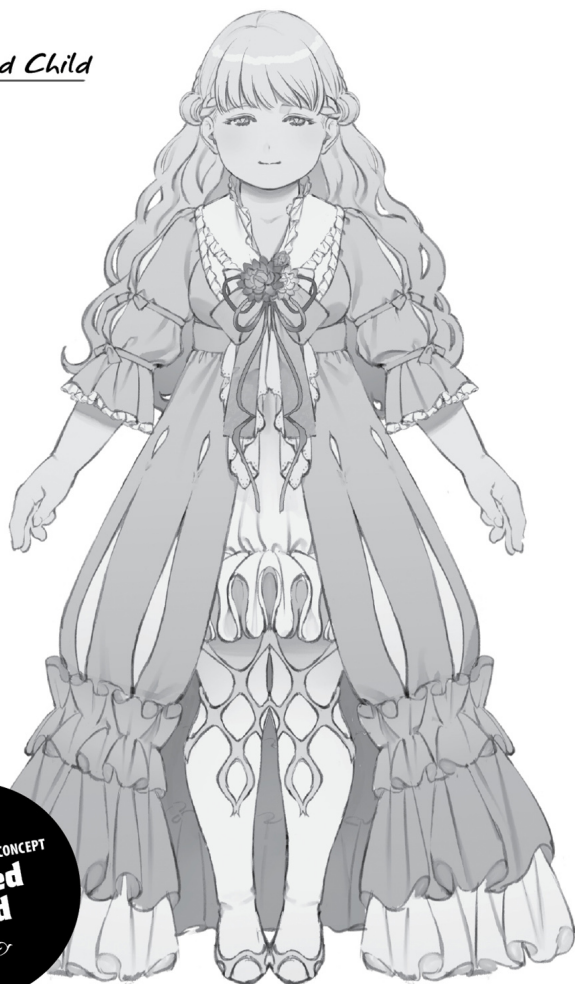
Agonizing over the answer wouldn't solve anything. Hesitation solved nothing. Regret solved nothing.

We had already let too much time slip by, and between the long day and my mental state, I was in bad shape. I had no idea who in Millishion was an ally, or who my enemies were. In a fight against the Man-God, you could never truly know.

We weren't having a repeat of the Shirone Kingdom. I'd learned from my mistakes.

I braced for whatever was coming and leapt into the night sky.

Blessed Child



CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

**Blessed
Child**

Claire



CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Claire

About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers and became number 1 on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publishing.

“Beginnings and endings can change your entire outlook,” said the author.



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